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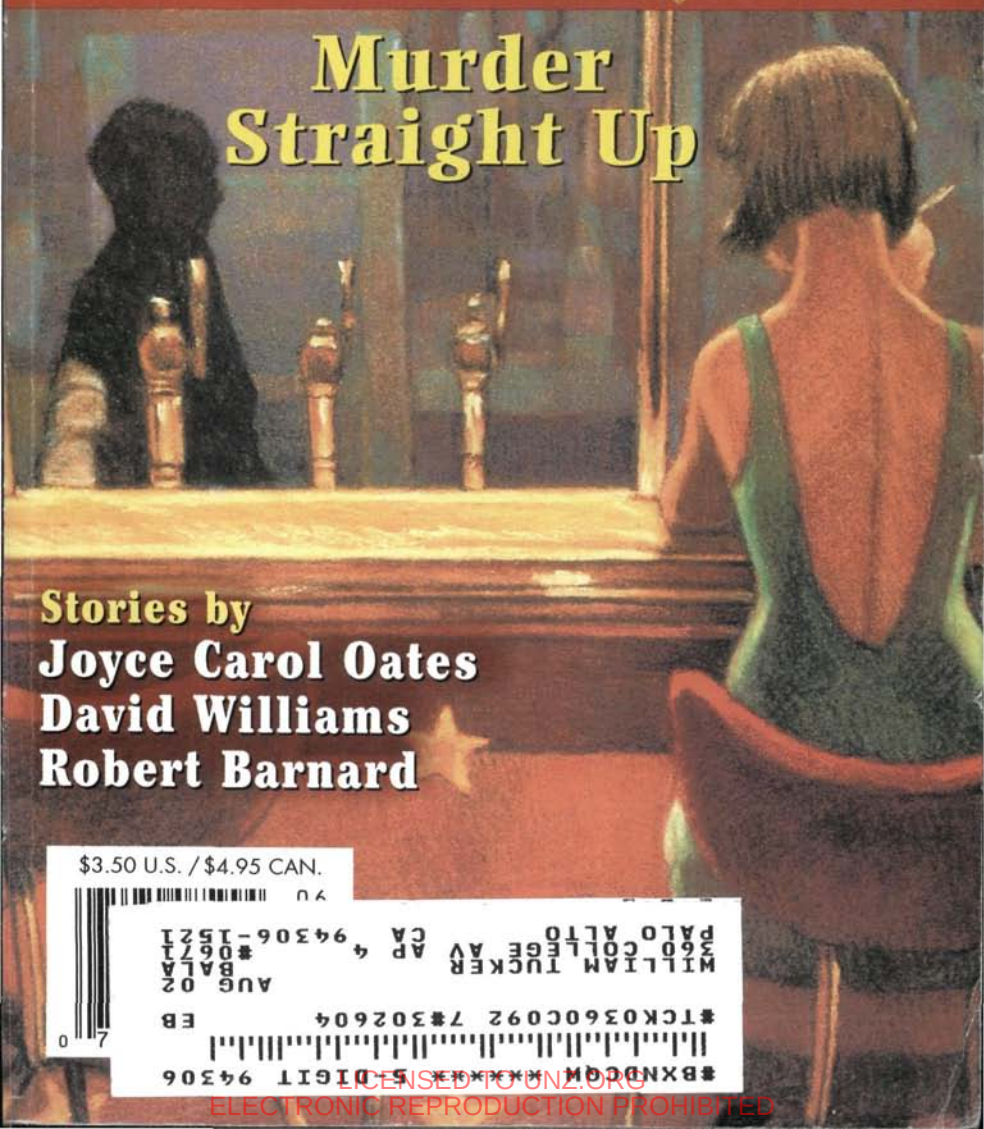

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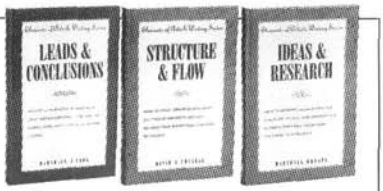

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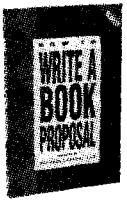

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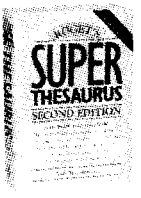

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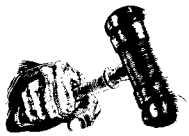

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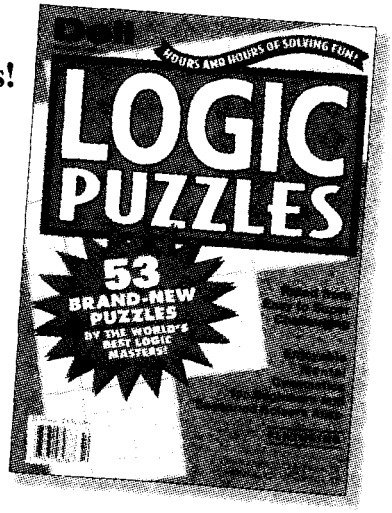

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Art by Allen Davis

A Nose for Murder

by David Williams

"Oh . . . *thith* is Mrs. Friston. I'm . . . I'm so *sobby* to trouble you. Is . . . is Doctor Rickle available, by any chance?" pleaded the diminutive Cynthia, then blew her sore nose very gently. Timid of voice and slight of figure, she was palpably short of the ability to muster even a justified modicum of self-assurance on the telephone. After all, she was one of the doctor's private, fee-paying patients. Her frequent recourse to his ministrations, usually over quite minor ailments, provided him with a satisfying contribution to income for the very minimum of effort.

In youth, Cynthia had sometimes been charitably described as elfin. At 58, she was an irredeemably plain matron, if a very rich one. She could have afforded to take more care than most women in disguising the ravages that time was exerting on her face and figure. Instead, she was content to let the years take their inevitable toll, as she put it, never troubling about her clothes, either, but wallowing in the comforts of her large home and four-acre garden, and the attentions of a handsome husband who was five years her junior, and who, despite one puerile weakness,

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suited her admirably. She only regretted that there had been no children of the twenty-three-year marriage.

"My dear Cynthia, what can I do for you? Are you unwell?" George Rickle was invariably ready to indulge one of his affluent patients, as now, at 5:30 on a Friday evening—or, come to that, at 5:30 on a Saturday morning, if needs be. It was this, and his being a fine physician, that had endeared him to so many of the wealthy inhabitants of Woodlake, an "exclusive," leafy commuter village in rural Berkshire.

An hour's drive to the southwest of London, Woodlake was "self-contained," with its desirable residences, a golf course, a pretty church, and a large supermarket, all within easy reach of the motorways and Heathrow Airport.

Who says volumes of crime short stories don't sell? When David Williams's short story collection *Criminal Intentions* hit the bookstores last summer, it sold out before its official publication date! The publisher, Robert Hale, immediately ordered a second edition and the book is still going strong. It "may well outsell my novels in hardback," Mr. Williams says. And that is no small feat, for he is the author of nearly two dozen popular hardcover novels. ¶

"I'm afraid you'll think I'm *becombing* a hypochondriac, George." Cynthia was as careful of her health as she was careless of her appearance.

"Nonsense. D'you want me to pop over?"

"Oh . . . oh, *doe*. Certainly *noth*. It's just that I have this . . . this heavy spring cold." It was early March.

"I can hear it in your voice. Lot of colds about, of course," the doctor put in sympathetically.

"I know. I *thig* I picked it up in the golf club at *didder* on Wednesday."

"Ha, so it's a *cordon bleu* virus?" the speaker chuckled. Incidentally, his own practical definition of "exclusive" required that no top-class property in the area was offered for sale at less than two million pounds.

"My . . . my breathing's blocked all the time, and my *dose* is so sore from wiping. I was in the chemist's this afternoon. Miss Jones, you know, the nice pharmacist, she said I should take a Rhine-Off capsule every twelve hours. So I bought a pack. I haven't taken any yet. I've always been wary of magic remedies. Is this one quite safe?"

"Perfectly. It was good advice. Rhine-Off is one of the slow-release decongestants. Won't cure your cold, but it'll stop those nasty symptoms. Quite harmless so long as you don't take it for

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too long. Swallow one capsule now with water."

"I'd hoped you'd say that. I have the capsule with a glass of *warda* beside me. I'll take it now." She imbibed, swallowing loudly for the doctor's benefit.

"Good for you, Cynthia. That'll see you through the night. Take another capsule when you wake. If that doesn't do the trick, give me a call tomorrow or Sunday. Paul's all right, is he?"

"Yes. He hasn't caught my cold. I hope he won't. He's not *cubbing* home this evening. Flying to Glasgow for a two-day company seminar."

"But you're not going with him?" Rickle's voice was registering proper concern.

"*Doe, doe.* It's strictly business."

"Good. Try to stay at home in the warm for a bit. Have a couple of early nights."

"I will. Thank you so *mudge.* I'm very grateful."

"No trouble at all, Cynthia. Goodbye." After putting the telephone down, the good doctor logged his £40 minimum consultation fee with Mrs. Friston on his laptop before resuming his study of the stock-market report on the Internet.

It was seven o'clock and very dark when Major Paul Digby Friston arrived, in icy rain, at the tree-screened marital home. As he had hoped, he hadn't passed another moving car or pedestrian since entering the village. He found his wife watching television in the snug. Although she had changed into a nightdress and frumpy negligee, she had not gone to bed. Her husband had phoned, shortly after she had spoken to the doctor, to say that he would drop by at the house on the way to Heathrow after all.

The London office of the financial-services company which employed Friston was on the northwest side of the city. Cynthia guessed that he was coming home only to please her, after already cramming too much into a long, tiring day. His action showed that he hated their not being together at weekends as much as she did—or nearly as much. It was bad enough that he sometimes had to see clients in the evenings, or at their own homes on a Saturday or a Sunday—not quite as often as her naughty Paul would sometimes have her believe, but then we all had our foibles, and she indulged him as she would a small child.

It wasn't as if her Paul absolutely had to work. She had money enough for them both. In truth, his contribution to the cost of their lifestyle was minuscule. Selling insurance for a small salary, plus commission, which was basically what he did, was not a massive source of income. It was simply that, as he put it to her, he was an old-fashioned husband who felt an obligation to help support his wife in a material way as best he could. It was a matter of self-

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respect. She admired him for that, but looked forward to the time when he had promised he would retire—in eighteen months, when he would be 55, and all hers.

"You needn't have come home," she half admonished after he kissed her on the cheek.

"I did, my precious. I'd forgotten to pack my razor. And, of course, there was the little matter of seeing you." He gave her a winning smile to match the understated compliment.

"And I love you for it. You look tired, darling."

"I am, quite. Needs must where the devil drives, of course," he sighed, and this time a stoic look accompanied the comment.

Paul Friston cut a tall, elegant, upright figure with his dark hair, strong chin, aquiline nose, and an appraising gaze that in Victorian fiction made women ready to surrender all. Surprisingly, he had gone through life convinced that he had exactly that effect on the opposite sex—a conviction, it has to be said, that'd had its owner's expectation fulfilled too often for him to stop believing in it.

Expensive schooling had failed to gain Friston a place at a university, but he had been lucky to find his feet in the army instead, and at a time when recruitment had been at an all-time low. After officer training, he had scraped a commission, and been accepted by a lesser regiment, but one where his prowess at cricket had tipped the scales for him. It was this sporting reputation that had sustained the young officer's advancement up to the rank of captain. Thereafter his military career had stuck. Written appraisals by a succession of commanding officers had deplored his lack of leadership qualities, especially in the areas of initiative and rapid tactical reaction. He had been asked to leave the service at the age of thirty-six with the retirement rank of major—but happily for him, this was after he had bowled over Cynthia and married her.

Friston would have preferred a more glamorous partner, but a man couldn't have everything, and none of his other girlfriends then, or even later, owned a fortune nearly as large as Cynthia's.

The major had maintained his military title because, he said, it was good for business. The real reason was that he felt it added to his swashbuckling image. His dedication to his dull, mousy wife had, from the start, been maintained because it provided him with the wherewithal for sustaining a lifestyle given to the pursuit of other women. His frequent absences from home seldom had anything to do with business: They had everything to do with the availability of current seducible lovelies. Despite that, he had never considered himself to be truly unfaithful because his attachments never lasted, and, at bottom, he was so profoundly devoted to Cynthia's money.

What had been weighing on Friston's mind for some time was

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his retirement, promised in an unguarded moment, but proving to be a vow which Cynthia reminded him of almost daily, and clearly meant him to keep. And the prospect was not just untenable: For the last several months it had become unendurable for three reasons.

Retirement at home with Cynthia would be impossible.

Friston's attractiveness to desirable young women in the mass, as it were, had been losing its edge, though he hated to admit it.

For the first time in his life, he was hopelessly, passionately, madly in love with a paragon called Avril Trite—and his passion was returned in equal measure.

The third consideration made the second a matter of no consequence (except it provided a saving sop to his ego), and while it offered no solution to the Cynthia problem, in a vague sense, it simplified things—particularly in a man given to dangerous oversimplifications.

Avril Trite was a slim blonde, arresting rather than pretty, a little over medium height, an intelligent widow with a magnetic personality, and a recent, modest inheritance, following the death of her mother. At thirty-three she was distinctly older than Friston's usual conquests, but the way the two had fused from the beginning, mentally as well as physically, had persuaded him that overly young lovers had never provided him with the mature and thrilling satisfactions he was now enjoying. That this was mere sublimation might have been clear to a psychologist, but, again, the picture was even simpler for Friston. Avril had lifted a veil for him. He needed to make her his own, and no price was too high to pay for that.

Nevertheless, there still was a price—and its name was Cynthia.

Friston had first called on Avril, by appointment, one afternoon in early January at her charmingly furnished small apartment in Richmond, ten miles west of London, on the Thames. She had answered one of his company's advertisements. Her late husband, a drunkard, she explained, had left her nothing but debts which she had at last paid off. Now she needed advice on how to invest her mother's money for steady growth and income, which was precisely what Friston's company claimed it existed to do for people. Except that the sum proved to be even more modest than Friston had first imagined. The interest on it, whichever way the capital was invested, would scarcely be enough to meet the mortgage payments on the apartment. An interior designer, Avril worked from home, but commissions had recently been few.

A mutual sense of sympathetic understanding had developed during the very first hour of the encounter. The way Avril had unburdened about her situation had prompted Friston to respond,

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without inhibition, in detailing his own "desperations" (leading, in a calculated way, to his "longings," his usual ploy), trapped in a marriage to a woman who adored him but who offered him neither mental nor physical satisfactions. That the woman was rich had been volunteered in response to a seemingly quite incidental question from Avril.

Later in the evening, the two had made love—a natural, pure progression in their short relationship, though the quality of the event had made it an astonishing one for Friston. Within a week he had totally determined to spend the rest of his life with Avril.

Divorcing Cynthia would have provided no material solution to her husband's problem, or rather to Avril Trite and Paul Friston's joint problem, as it had become. Cynthia's fortune would effectively have remained hers. The consideration that if Cynthia should die first, then he would inherit everything was something Friston had hesitated openly to bring up—until Avril did. Soon after that, and following much, but not too much, agonising, it was Cynthia's early demise that the two lovers coolly chose not just to examine, but to initiate. For in the end there was no deep rationalising, no profound justification. Their joint endeavours were focussed solely on how doing away with Cynthia should be accomplished.

"You haven't told anyone I'd be coming home?" Friston enquired lightly, as he walked upstairs behind Cynthia on the way to their bedroom.

"No. No one's telephoned. In any case, you said not to mention it to anyone."

He smiled. "That was because I cancelled my last meeting. It was outside the office, and I had too much to do before I could leave. But I couldn't get hold of the client, so I left a message on his machine. He might have tried to call me back here. He has the number. Anyway, that's how I cleared the time to get home to you." He moved ahead of her to make sure the bedroom curtains were closed before she turned on the lights.

"So thoughtful of you, my sweet," she said, squeezing his hand.

"I was worried about that cold you were starting this morning."

"Oh, it's gone. Quite . . . evaporated." She didn't want to tell him about consulting the doctor over anything so trivial—and the Rhine-Off capsule had already cured her sniffles.

"Good, but take it easy while I'm away. You haven't any dates tomorrow, have you?"

"No, none. I shan't be seeing anyone, or going out. Just a quiet day here with a book."

"That's fine. I told everyone I was getting the eight-fifteen Glasgow shuttle this evening," her husband went on. "Actually I rebooked onto the nine-fifteen."

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She glanced at the time. "So you can stay a little longer?"

"Not really. I'll have to be off again in a minute. I'll just get that razor from the bathroom." In fact, he had quite a lot planned for the next hour.

"I still can't get over it, Inspector. Still can't get over it," Paul Friston repeated, motioning the policeman to a seat in the drawing room. It was just after nine on the following Tuesday morning, with sleet still falling heavily outside. "I'm sorry I was so incoherent on Sunday evening. Did I give you adequate answers to your questions?"

"You did, sir. As I told you, I held over some routine ones, and that's why I'm here now. Routine questions and a few that have come up in the course of the investigation." Detective Inspector Gordon Miler seated himself gingerly on the edge of the green velvet armchair as though afraid it might fall apart under his imposing frame. Too late, he wished he'd opted for something more robust. It was not that he was overweight, not for his height and width. He was just an all-round commanding size. In his late twenties, he wore an almost permanently earnest, encouraging expression, lit by wide-open, innocent blue eyes, which made it hard for some to credit his exceptional acuity.

Miler had admired this room on Sunday, as he had the rest of the house, including the bedroom where the Scenes of Crime team and the pathologist had each made tortuous examinations, finishing barely an hour ahead of Friston's return early that evening. Because of the time his journey had taken, the bereaved husband had been excused the sight of his wife's strangled and nearly frozen body crumpled on the floor before the open door to the balcony. He had gone to the hospital mortuary on the following morning to make the formal identification.

"I'm sorry for the way the tragic news had to be broken to you, sir. But we thought the doctor would handle it best," the policeman went on, producing a notebook from a side pocket of his grey tweed jacket.

"I'm not complaining, Inspector." Friston had dropped into a chair opposite his visitor. "George Rickle's an old friend. He showed that by coming here at midday on Sunday to see Cynthia was all right. As for his raising the alarm when he saw the balcony door was wide open . . ." The speaker paused, then let out a long breath before continuing. ". . . well, that was a merciful event. Otherwise I'd have been the one who found her. At least I was spared that. But it was still a terrible shock. To learn on the telephone your wife was done to death in your own home when you were seven hundred miles away, killed for the sake of some paltry jewellery. You feel so . . . so utterly shocked, and . . . yes, so bloody

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furious. That's what I am still. I just want to find the swine who did it and take him apart." The speaker lowered his face into his hands.

"We're close to finding him, sir."

Friston looked up almost too sharply. "You're confident of that?"

"Pretty well, yes. Speed is all important at the start of a murder investigation, of course." The inspector's countenance showed even greater earnestness. "The first forty-eight hours are critical. It's also when the officer in charge gets the biggest allocation of personnel. I've had twenty-seven people on the case since Sunday night. That'll reduce if the trail cools. Except, don't worry, I won't let it." He gave an embarrassed grin. "If it was a burglar, who panicked when your wife woke up, and strangled her with the first thing handy, he's left clues which are being scientifically exposed right now."

"The rope of the curtain tie-back being the first thing handy," put in Friston. "But why strangle her? Why attack her at all? He'd already got her jewels. Aren't burglars supposed to get the hell out if they're disturbed?"

"Usually they do, sir. But we don't yet know the full circumstances. Incidentally, was the bedroom balcony door always left open at night?"

"When I'm home, yes. My wife is . . . was . . . a fresh-air fiend. I implored her always to lock it when she was alone. I think she usually did, but having a head cold, well, that could have been why she wanted to keep the place well aired. George Rickle told me that with the body so cold, it'd be difficult to estimate the time of death."

"Nearly impossible by normal methods, yes," the inspector answered almost absently. It seemed he was more interested in the door to the balcony. "We noticed the windows on either side of the door don't open, sir."

"That's right, I'm afraid, so there's no other way of getting fresh air into the room, except less directly through the bathroom window. We'd always planned to have those windows changed, but never did." He frowned. "I'm afraid we've been backward in rejecting electric gates and CCTV cameras. I know a lot of local residents have put them in, but more haven't. Like Cynthia and me, they've felt such devices reduce the rural atmosphere we've all worked hard to preserve in the area. Cynthia had even opposed increases in street lighting. Now it seems she's paid a high price for her country ways, as I have." He sighed, adding in stoutish mitigation, "Of course, we've had a burglar alarm for years."

The policeman nodded. "The alarm was armed downstairs when the uniformed police arrived on Sunday, sir."

"Yes, Cynthia would have set it before she went to bed Saturday

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night. But only on this floor, not upstairs." He frowned. "So, common burglars are less careful than premeditated murderers?"

"Yes, sir. And impulse murders are sometimes easier to solve than the planned kind. Unless something happens to upset the plan." Miler's study of Friston lingered for a moment before he looked down again at his notes. "Now, could we just deal with those follow-up questions I mentioned, sir?"

"Of course, Inspector, fire ahead, please." Friston was content with the officer's plodding pace. He wondered what the other twenty-six members of the team were finding to do.

"Right, sir. You flew to Glasgow on Friday evening?"

"Yes. For a two-day staff seminar at a hotel. I have the details here." He produced some typed sheets from a document case and passed them to the inspector. "God, if only I hadn't needed to be there," he completed.

Miler glanced at the top sheet. "But you didn't leave for the airport from here, sir?"

"No. I drove there direct from our London office. I caught the nine-fifteen shuttle from Heathrow."

"So the last time you saw your wife?"

"Was here after breakfast on Friday," the other man supplied. "I talked to her on the phone later in the day."

"From the office, sir?"

"Yes."

"On an office phone, or your mobile?"

"Er . . . on my office phone."

"At what time would that have been?"

Friston shrugged. "Six-fifteen, or thereabouts. Does it matter?"

"We've got a printout from British Telecom, and from all the mobile operators, covering calls made to and from the house at the weekend, sir. We're needing to account for the lot."

"I see. Well, I rang her again on Saturday from Glasgow, on my mobile. That was at the end of the morning session at . . . at twelve thirty-five. You should find that on the printout. I wanted to know how she was feeling."

"And she was all right, sir?"

Friston gave a pained smile. "She was fine. Just . . . just fine." There was a catch in his throat on the last word.

The policeman paused sympathetically before asking. "Did she tell you she'd rung Dr. Rickle about the cold, sir?"

"No, but he told me so here on Sunday night. Something about her taking a pill to stop her nose running."

"Yes. We have a problem with those Rhine-Off capsules, sir. It seems your wife bought a twelve-pack at the local chemist's on Friday afternoon, and took one capsule after consulting the doctor. She'd never taken the product before."

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"That's what Rickle told me."

"Had you ever bought Rhine-Off capsules, sir?"

"No, never."

"So apart from what your wife bought, there wouldn't have been another pack in the house?"

"I suppose not, no. What are you getting at?"

"The pack is in the bathroom cabinet, sir, and there's only one capsule missing."

Friston's eyebrows lifted. "So she only took one. The stuff worked, or else the cold wasn't as bad as she thought."

"Dr. Rickle said the cold was a very bad one, sir, judging from your wife's voice on the phone Friday evening. He'd suggested she took one capsule straight away, and another first thing in the morning. How did her voice sound when you spoke to her?"

"On Friday evening, pretty normal. On Saturday, the same." The speaker paused, then leaned forward with a confiding look. "This is difficult to admit, Inspector, but my darling Cynthia was a bit of a hypochondriac. She'd often start on a long course of medicine for a supposed ailment which would be completely gone next morning. That cupboard is full of practically unused nostrums. I know George Rickle says her nose sounded bunged up, but she could easily have been exaggerating on the phone to justify calling him. She was like that."

"I see, sir. Perhaps . . . " The policeman paused as both men heard the ring of the doorbell. "I'll answer that, sir. I'm expecting one of my sergeants." He left the room and didn't return for over two minutes. When he did reappear, he was accompanied by a tall, dark-haired young woman, smartly turned out in a black wool trouser suit over a white polo-necked sweater. Her brisk step was as firm as the searching look she fixed on Friston.

"This is Detective Sergeant Kim Bevan, sir, who's one of my assistants on the case," the inspector explained, while the sergeant, without waiting to be invited, seated herself on the end of a sofa close to her boss, setting a large black leather shoulder bag down beside her.

Friston had stood up when the woman entered. After acknowledging her with a smile he had resumed his seat before she announced, "When a Mr. Arthur Pristable heard of your wife's death yesterday, Major Friston, he got in touch with us. He's an ex-policeman, now a private investigator who's been retained by your wife for the last three years. The arrangement was handled through Ms. Rachel D. Smythe, your wife's business accountant. Mr. Pristable's bills were paid through her."

"Did you know anything about this arrangement, sir?" the inspector put in.

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Friston cleared his throat. "No. So are you going to tell me about it?"

On a nod from Miler the woman detective continued, "On your wife's instructions, relayed through Ms. Smythe, Mr. Pristable, or one of his partners, has followed you when you called on single and sometimes married women in various parts of southeast England, but mostly in the London area."

"I find that difficult to credit."

"The reports are very detailed, sir," the sergeant responded.

"Hmm. I'll take your word for that, for the moment." Friston grunted. "Oh dear. So my poor darling Cynthia suspected I was having affairs with my clients, did she? In my sort of work, of course, one always runs the risk that one's spouse can put the wrong interpretation on things. Strange that she never confronted me with her fears."

The woman officer cleared her throat. "According to Mr. Pristable, and confirmed by Ms. Smythe, sir, your wife didn't just suspect, she was convinced you'd been having affairs ever since you married her. It seems she didn't mind about them, so long as they didn't go on too long. Actually, when they were happening, she thought you were more attentive to her. It appears from Mr. Pristable's reports, sir, that the affairs never did last long."

Friston emitted a loud and exaggerated guffaw. "I must say, if you believe all that you're as gullible as Pristable and Rachel Smythe, and, sadly, my dearest Cynthia. But she was right that I didn't have long affairs. You see, I never had affairs of any kind." He sighed. "I mean, how could any of them possibly know whether my calls on women clients were strictly business or some kind of amorous adventure? Especially if they happened behind closed doors. How did this Pristable know a client's partner wasn't present? And all because poor Cynthia had developed another of her fixations. You know she had them in other contexts, too? But I'm damned if I'm going into all that now."

"Your wife insisted to Ms. Smythe that she usually knew when the alleged affairs were happening, sir," said DS Bevan. "This was partly because you often told her you'd spent the night away in one place when Mr. Pristable had reported you were somewhere else. Also, the visits seldom happened entirely behind closed doors. There were sometimes restaurants and hotels involved."

Friston looked ruffled. "Really, this is too stupid. And anyway, what's it got to do with my wife's tragic death?" He switched his gaze to the inspector. "I mean, is this nonsense what your army of detectives is engaged in when it's supposed to be catching my wife's murderer?"

"I'm afraid there's rather more to it than you've heard already,

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sir," said Miler, whose tone and general demeanour had become a lot sharper.

"We believe you're familiar with a lady called Mrs. Avril Trite, sir," put in the sergeant, who had been distinctly sharp from the start.

"Yes, she's a valued client," Friston answered stiffly.

"So valued that in the last eight weeks, between you, you've made forty-eight phone calls to each other on your mobiles, in addition to the twenty-five you've made to the lady on your office phone."

"I've told you, Mrs. Trite is a client. I've had to confer with her a lot over the . . . the disposition of her financial holdings. But what right have you got to delve into my private affairs, or hers? Your job is . . ."

"Our job is to leave no stone unturned in finding your wife's killer, Major Friston," the inspector interrupted. "Those were your exact words to me as we parted here on Sunday night. We are trying to follow your wishes."

Friston sighed testily. "So are you suggesting that my business relationship with Mrs. Trite has something to do with my wife's death? If you are, ludicrous as that is, perhaps I should send for my lawyer."

"We're not suggesting anything yet, sir," put in the sergeant. "Only asking you to answer some questions that are causing us problems. From the private investigator's reports, it seems that you've been conducting an affair with Mrs. Trite. Since we know . . ."

"And if I deny . . ." Friston tried to interrupt.

"I was going to add, sir," the sergeant insisted, "that we have sworn evidence you've spent six nights at Mrs. Trite's flat since January eighth last, and visited her there at least twelve times at different hours of the day over the same period, as well as taken her to restaurants. Since we have a list of the visits, with dates and times, it'd be better if you admitted the relationship so we can get on to more pressing matters."

Friston looked from the sergeant to the inspector, then back again. "Very well. The lady and I have been seeing each other. But what the devil has that to do with Cynthia's death?"

"Thank you, sir." The inspector sounded relieved. "We'll come to that in a moment. First, I have to tell you the pathologist's report suggests that your wife died on Friday evening."

The other man looked surprised. "But that's impossible. I spoke to her myself on the phone, Saturday lunchtime."

"So you said, sir. You also told us you were never here on Friday evening. That you went straight from the office to the airport."

"That's right."

"Except that the tape from a neighbour's CCTV gate camera

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shows your car leaving this road at eight-nineteen on Friday evening, in time for you to catch your Glasgow flight. Were you in the car, sir, or was someone else using it?"

Friston shifted in his chair. "It must be a mistake. Which neighbour?"

"It's a Mr. Elder's house, sir."

"The Elders have a gate camera? I didn't know . . . but . . . but that's three hundred yards from here. How could . . . ?"

As Friston floundered, sweat breaking out on his forehead, the inspector provided, "The camera swivels, sir. It covers the whole area around the gateway every sixty seconds, and happened to pick up your car."

There was silence for several seconds before Friston straightened in the chair and, looking the inspector in the eye, explained. "All right, I did pop home for a few minutes. To see Cynthia was all right. But I'd told clients and people in the office on Friday that I had to leave as early as I did to catch my plane. I decided on the way down on Sunday to stick to that story. It was silly, probably, but I didn't want to admit to such a trivial but possibly embarrassing fib, commercially, I mean."

"Not even in the circumstances, sir?"

"You're right, of course," Friston admitted heavily.

It was the policeman's turn to pause, pointedly lengthening the silence that had followed. "Incidentally, sir, that gate camera also picked up a car rented by Mrs. Trite driving toward your house on Saturday at twelve-sixteen P.M. That was fifteen minutes before you telephoned from Glasgow. Would she have rented a car because her white, soft-topped Porsche is too memorable, especially in daylight?"

Friston, clearly thrown by the information, ran a hand up and down the sleeve of his cashmere sweater before replying, "Yes, well, that visit could easily be explained. My wife and Mrs. Trite had become friends. It's often the way, isn't it? A friendship can develop between a man's wife and his, er . . ."

"His mistress, sir?" Kim Bevan supplied in a wooden voice.

"If you insist. Except Mrs. Avril Trite and I never suspected Cynthia knew about our . . . brief infatuation. We had Mrs. Trite to lunch here early in February. I'd mentioned her off and on, as a decorator client, and Cynthia wanted to meet her. They took to each other. Perhaps Avril had promised to drop in for a snack lunch on Saturday. To keep Cynthia company. I believe her car's been in for repair. That would account for the rented one."

"You didn't mention any of this before, sir?" questioned the sergeant.

"Because, as I said, it's only a possibility. You must ask Mrs. Trite."

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"If the pathologist's report is correct, sir, your wife was lying dead in the bedroom upstairs when Mrs. Trite arrived on Saturday. It seems she must have let herself in, switched off the alarm, answered your call at twelve thirty-five, reset the alarm, and left, establishing for the record that the phone was answered by your wife."

"Except I don't accept a word of that . . . that scenario."

"Mrs. Trite does, sir," the sergeant continued icily. "She insists she thought your wife was out, that she let herself in with the key you'd lent her. She answered the phone and you were the caller. When your wife didn't return, she just left the house, thinking she'd got the day wrong, or that your wife had forgotten she was coming."

The colour drained from Friston's face. "When did you see Mrs. Trite?"

"Early this morning, sir. I left her half an hour ago. She doesn't want to be involved in a possible murder investigation. Perhaps she hasn't mentioned it to you, but her husband's death three years ago involved a police enquiry after a coroner's court returned an open verdict on the cause of death. It seems he was very wealthy. The enquiry was later shelved because of insufficient evidence. It can be reopened, of course."

Friston swallowed awkwardly. "Very well. I admit Cynthia wasn't in when I rang on Saturday. Mrs. Trite happened to be there. We thought it . . . it must have been that Cynthia had gone out, forgetting the appointment. I'd given Mrs. Trite a key so she could get in on . . . on another occasion, when . . . when Cynthia was away. I'd given her the alarm code then as well. Didn't she tell you that?"

The sergeant shook her head. "It must have slipped her mind, sir."

"That's it, yes."

"The fact remains, Major Friston, the forensic evidence firmly indicates your wife died on Friday evening."

"The evidence can *indicate* whatever it likes, Sergeant, but the inspector just told me the time of death was almost impossible to estimate. I'm sure Cynthia must have been alive on Saturday, unless you can prove otherwise. Did Mrs. Trite tell you she had gone up to the bedroom when she was here and found it empty?"

"She said she didn't go upstairs at all, sir."

Friston's jaw stiffened. "I expect because she was sure Cynthia was out. The reason I said I'd spoken to Cynthia on the phone was to avoid exactly what's happening now, with you trying to prove I couldn't have spoken to her because she was dead. That implies I had something to do with her death, which is monstrous. I'm aware the police always suspect the husband in these cases, but

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this time you're very wrong. I know in my heart that Cynthia was alive on Saturday, and the sooner you get back to accepting that, the sooner we'll catch the real villain." Breathing heavily, the speaker fell back in his chair.

DS Bevan glanced across at the inspector, who nodded again slowly.

"I'm afraid the forensic report did more than merely indicate the death occurred on Friday evening, sir," the sergeant said. "You see, there's the evidence of the Rhine-Off capsule."

"What evidence?" Friston demanded testily. "We know she took one capsule. So what?"

"And we know when she took it, sir. At six on Friday, while she was talking to the doctor. If she'd lived until the same time on Saturday, or even until midday, there'd have been no trace of the undissolved ingredients in her body."

"Who says so?"

Miler cleared his throat. "The Home Office pathologist who did the postmortem examination, sir. A very conscientious, highly qualified lady. A slow-acting decongestive is itself a kind of clock, with its granules arranged to dissolve at different intervals at normal body temperature."

"My wife had a cold, probably a high temperature, so . . ."

"Exactly, sir," the inspector interjected. "If anything, that would have reduced the time it took for the medication to dissolve. Instead, the pathologist found particles of it in the lower bowel. If your wife had lived for twenty-four hours, those substances would have dispersed or been passed through the body. The manufacturers confirmed as much last night. So, according to the pathologist's best calculations, your wife was strangled between seven and eight-thirty on Friday evening. And in view of the unsatisfactory account you have given us of your own movements that evening, I'm afraid I have to ask you to accompany us to the station for further questioning."

A staggered Friston was barely taking in the words.

Later, in his cell, after he had been charged, he didn't hold it against Avril for lying to prove she hadn't been involved. He even accepted the new possibility that she might have murdered her husband. What he firmly could not credit was that the only real love of his life could have had that same fate in mind for him, once she had married him, and Cynthia's fortune. But then, Major Friston had always suffered from an excess of conceit—and a shortfall in rapid tactical reaction. ●

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LESSON IN TERROR

by Donald Olson

All authors have themes they revisit time and again. One of Donald Olson's has to do with neglected, abandoned, or lonely women of a certain age. In a lesser writer's hands such unflamboyant characters might founder, but Mr. Olson always manages to reveal some surprising facets of his protagonists. In an Olson story, the plot twist usually emerges from character rather than circumstance, as in this tale of a widow who decides to learn to drive. ¶

When Oliver Hazel died he left his wife Letty with sufficient means to maintain a comfortable but by no means lavish lifestyle: the old house on Shadyside Lane, life insurance, a few stocks, and a car. What he did not leave her was any children to help her adjust to widowhood. Oliver had been a spouse of the old school who preferred to keep the "little woman" in a cocoon of domestic tranquillity, free from the strain of knowing anything about family finances or what to do if the lights go out.

Letty's friends, therefore, were surprised and delighted by how quickly she acquired a degree of self-reliance. These friends assumed that one of the first things Letty would do would be to sell the car, which had been one of Oliver's most prized possessions.

The car, a Mercedes-Benz, was almost but not quite of the classic vintage, kept in showroom condition and with very little mileage on it considering its age. Letty agreed that, yes, the car must be sold, Oliver never having encouraged her to learn to drive.

Yet Letty made no move in this direction, and by the time she had emerged from that cocoon of domestic tranquillity she found herself, at first for purely sentimental reasons, unwilling to part with Oliver's beloved motorcar. It remained in the double garage where it had spent more time than it had ever spent on the road.

And then one day over bridge Letty's friend Violet Cricklewood, also a widow, happened to mention that her nephew Harry knew a collector of old cars who would buy the Mercedes for a price Violet could scarcely believe, nor could Letty.

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"Surely it's not worth that much," she said, "an old car like that."

"Silly, it's not just any old car. Harry called it a collector's dream." Larry had seen the car and his own mouth had watered.

"I really don't need the money," said Letty. "At least not yet. Knock on wood."

"But what's the point of just letting it sit there?"

The words then popped out of Letty's mouth quite without conscious forethought. "It won't just be sitting there. I'm going to drive it."

"You? You don't know *how* to drive."

"I'm not too old to learn," said Letty with a burst of confidence she would never have expressed before Oliver's death.

Letty lost no time in acting upon her impulse. She looked in the yellow pages and called a number at random. The man who answered, in a voice Letty found pleasingly deferential, identified himself as Ernest Overbeck. He was the proprietor of a garage on Market Street for whom giving driving instructions was an important sideline. He made an appointment to visit Letty at her home.

Letty found Ernest Overbeck's appearance as pleasing as his voice. He was a well-set-up man in his late fifties with a full head of silver-gray hair, twinkling blue eyes, and a jovial manner.

He at once assured Letty that, no indeed, she was not foolish to want to learn to drive, that he'd taught folks much older than she. "And please," he said, "call me Ernie."

Letty unlocked the right-hand bay of the garage to show him the car. He expressed his admiration with a soft whistle of surprise.

"She's a dream, Mrs. Hazel. A real beauty." He walked around it, opened the door, and caressed the rich leather upholstery. "Worth a pretty penny. You could sell it, buy yourself a brand-new little runabout, and still have money in the bank."

"That's what my friends urge me to do, but I wouldn't dream of it. It was my late husband's pride and joy."

Arrangements for driving lessons were soon concluded. Two lessons a week for as many weeks as Letty's progress required.

Later that week Violet picked Letty up to go shopping. On the way downtown they drove by the garage on Market Street. In the forecourt stood a late-model sedan with big signs on its top and trunk reading STUDENT DRIVER.

"They'll warn the unwary to get out of your way," laughed Violet.

"Oh dear, I do hope I won't make a complete fool of myself. I'd be mortified."

If Letty's first lesson did not go swimmingly, neither did it destroy her confidence. Ernie Overbeck was patience personified, the ideal instructor. Letty felt totally at ease with him. In some ways he

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reminded her of Oliver. She would be sorry when the lessons were finished.

She always took pains to dress becomingly before Ernie Overbeck arrived to pick her up for her lesson, quite as if he were a gentleman friend taking her to the sort of social function to which Oliver used to escort her. She laughed at herself for such girlish nonsense, but what harm could it do when there were so few things to relieve her boredom?

It was on the third week of her lessons that something unexpected happened. Letty was looking out the window when the student-driver car pulled into the driveway. But when she left the house it was to see not Ernie Overbeck but a much younger man climbing out of the car. He was slightly built, with a blond crew cut.

Letty called out to him as he was shading his eyes to peer through the garage window. He turned with a smile on his blue-eyed, not unattractive face. "Hiya. You Mrs. Hazel?"

"I am. Where is Mr. Overbeck?"

The young man scratched his head. "Ernie, he ain't feelin' so hot. Flu bug, I guess. I'm subbin' for him."

"You're an instructor?"

"Yes, ma'am, Ernie didn't want you to miss your lesson." He put out his hand. "I'm Stanley. They call me Stash. Shall we hit the road?"

Letty saw no reason to hesitate, although she thought Mr. Overbeck ought to have called her and explained about the substitute. Perhaps he was more ill than the young man had implied. The young were so quick to downplay the afflictions of the elderly, and to this youth, Ernie, as well as she, probably seemed ancient.

Letty soon felt almost as relaxed with Stash as she did with Ernie Overbeck. At one point he said, "I tell ya, Mrs. Hazel, I bet you could pass your driver's test right now."

"Mr. Overbeck seems pleased with my progress."

Stash had her do a few three-point turns before heading downtown. He kept telling her how well she was doing. "Some older folks, ya know, they make the mistake of bein' *too* cautious."

"My husband always accused me of that. Not about driving, of course. He did all the driving. I never even thought about learning. There was no reason to."

By now they were on Main Street, approaching the downtown business section. Letty still felt somewhat apprehensive about driving in traffic, which was quite heavy this early in the afternoon. And it had begun to rain.

Stash had her drive twice around one of the city blocks before suggesting she try parallel parking around the corner from the Union Trust Bank.

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"Long as we're right here," he said, "I might as well take care of an errand at the bank. I won't be long. Keep the engine runnin'."

He twisted around to reach for a canvas bag on the backseat, gave Letty a wink and a smile, and jumped out of the car.

Letty relaxed. She watched people, heads bowed, scuttling through the drizzling rain. Thank goodness the girls were coming that day for bridge. Otherwise, so dismal an afternoon would seem endless. That morning she'd prepared sandwiches and baked a chocolate cake.

Stash could not have been gone more than five minutes before he came hurtling around the corner, still clutching the canvas bag.

"Let's go, let's go!" he cried, tossing the bag in the backseat. The sharp tone of his voice startled Letty. She maneuvered out of the parking space and stopped at the corner. "Move it, move it!" Stash shouted. "Whatcha waitin' for?"

"I'm being *cautious,*" Letty snapped, astonished by the young man's abrupt change of manner.

"Forget caution. Just get us the hell outa here."

"Is something wrong?"

"Hell no, nothin's wrong. I just made a slight withdrawal from the bank, that's all. If we pass a cop, don't slow down."

A frightening presentiment set Letty's heart aflutter. "I don't understand. What have you done? Where are we going?"

"You heard me. I robbed the friggin' bank." A burst of wild laughter "Pretty neat, eh? Perfect getaway car. Cops won't look twice at us. Now drive straight to your house. Lesson's over. You do like I say, you won't get hurt."

The rain was falling more heavily now, the rapid motion of the windshield wipers seeming to match the swift beating of her heart as Letty tried to think what she ought to do. Slam on the brakes? Leap from the car? What would Oliver have done?

"Mr. Overbeck—"

"Don't you worry none about ole Ernie. I got ole Ernie safely on ice. He ain't gonna get hurt if you do what I tell ya. Otherwise . . ."

A quick glance, a stifled gasp, and Letty knew what he suddenly had in his hand. She'd watched too many TV police dramas not to recognize a switchblade knife. She nearly lost control of the car as it swerved toward the curb.

"Watch what yer doin'!" Stash bellowed.

Trying not to imagine what might happen when they reached the house, Letty turned into Shadyside Lane. The street was deserted. Dense rainclouds created a somber twilight atmosphere.

Stash ordered her to pull into the driveway and open the garage door. The metal doors, old as the house, swung upward at a light pull on the handles. Oblivious of the pouring rain, Letty did as he

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said. Stash told her to get back in the car, drive it into the garage, and shut the door.

Letty abandoned any idea of trying to escape. She knew the couple in the house next door would both be at work. On the other side of the house was a wooded lot.

"Hurry up. Get in the house," Stash ordered.

By now the immediate numbing shock of what had happened had begun to subside. Letty unlocked the back door. Once they were inside she said breathlessly, "I must go upstairs."

"You stay put," Stash snarled.

"But I *must*. The bathroom's upstairs."

"Then make it snappy. And no tricks. Wait a minute!" He'd spotted the phone on the kitchen wall, yanked it off the hook. "In case you got an extension upstairs."

Letty's first thought was to lock herself in the bathroom, remain there until Stash had gone. He had robbed a bank. Surely he would waste no time in making his escape. Or might he stay where he was until dark? And then what? Leave her unharmed, knowing she could identify him?

When she crept back downstairs, fearing that otherwise he might ransack the house—though she had no idea what she could do to stop him—she found Stash in the kitchen wolfing down a huge chunk of her beautiful chocolate cake. Anger overcame prudence.

"You're a very wicked young man. Robbing banks, terrorizing old ladies, desecrating my lovely cake." Which seemed at the moment an equally vicious transgression. "Whatever would your mother think?"

Stash wiped his lips of icing and giggled. "She'd think I was a very naughty boy—if she was still alive, which she might or might not be for all I know."

"Whatever put such a wicked idea in your head?"

"You mean hittin' the bank? I don't know, I guess it was seein' that student-driver car toolin' around town."

"But why involve me?"

"Seein' a little old lady behind the wheel would help fool the cops."

"But how did you know about my lesson?"

"I squeezed the info outa ole Ernie. Any more questions?"

"Yes! What have you done to him? Did you hurt him?"

"I already told ya. He's okay. Temporarily outa commission, you might say."

He crossed to the window and looked out. "All you gotta do to stay healthy is hand over your car keys. I ain't takin' the chance of skippin' town in ole Ernie's car. Now gimme the keys and I'm outa here."

Letty knew this was not the time to lament the loss of Oliver's pride and joy. Anything to get rid of this dreadful young hoodlum. She took the keys off a hook beside the kitchen door.

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There came a sound from outdoors. They both heard it. Stash rushed to the window. "What the *hell?*" he cried.

Letty looked out. A car had pulled into the driveway and parked close against the door of that side of the garage where the Mercedes was housed. Three women piled out.

"Oh dear," murmured Letty, not knowing whether to laugh or cry. "It's the girls. Our bridge day."

Stash swore. "Just what I need. You gotta get rid of 'em."

"I shall do no such thing," replied Letty with the revived spirit of a besieged garrison commander at sight of reinforcements. She hurried to fling open the door before Stash could stop her. "Hello, girls! Come in, come in."

"We're early, we know," Myrtle Pulover explained. "My doctor had to cancel, so I thought I might as well pick up the girls instead of going back home."

Stash stood glowering in the background as the women followed Myrtle into the room. It was Violet who first noticed him. "Oh dear, are we interrupting something? You have company."

Letty could think on her feet when necessary. "He—he's Oliver's nephew. From out of town."

"Oh, really?" Violet marched straight up to Stash and offered her hand. "I'm Violet Cricklewood. How nice to meet you."

"His name's Stanley," said Letty.

Stash stared dumbly at Violet, briefly touched her outstretched hand as if it were a paw with claws. Letty, like an actress forgetting her lines, groped for words. What could she do but introduce her other friends?

"How good to see a young man with a sensible haircut," said Julia Munson, beaming at Stash. He caught Letty's eye and signaled her to follow him into the other room, where he seized her arm, harshly whispering into her ear. "You gotta make 'em move so's I can get the car outa the garage."

"You'll have to be patient. Oliver never let *anyone* drive his car. The girls know that."

Only later would Letty be able to reflect on the bizarre nature of the situation. The four ladies sitting around the bridge table in the living room while Stash slumped on the sofa glaring at them as if willing them into a state of discomfort that would encourage an early departure. Instead, they paid scant heed to his presence, although occasionally one or another of them, as if sensing he might feel hurt at being ignored, favored him with a bright smile or casual remark.

After the first rubber, Violet said, "We could play something else if Stanley would care to join us."

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This was met with polite smiles of approval. Stash said, "No thanks. Just forget I'm here."

"It wouldn't be the same as poker with the boys, would it, Stanley?" said Myrtle.

When time came for refreshments Stash's sullen refusal to partake did not dampen the party atmosphere. Letty observed that he was becoming edgy, nipping at his fingernails and occasionally getting up to peer out the window, but never stirring from the room. The ladies appeared to find nothing untoward in his presence or his behavior. What they might have been thinking, Letty could not guess.

The afternoon wore on. Outside, the rain was still falling. Presently, Violet said, "By the way, Myrtle, you won't have to drive me home. Buddy will pick me up. He said he'd come in and fix that dripping faucet for you, Letty."

"I'll bet Stanley could do that," ventured Julia. "Young men are usually so clever at that sort of thing. And he must be bored silly listening to us cackle."

"I don't know squat about plumbing," growled Stash. Violet's remark about the eventual arrival of Buddy appeared to unsettle him further. Finally, looking at his watch, he got up, covertly beckoning to Letty, and moved toward the kitchen. "Look, I gotta shove off. Nice meetin' y'all."

In the kitchen he leveled a menacing look at Letty. "You remember what I said. Just keep your lip buttoned and go on with your hen party. Or else."

With that he pulled out his knife and flourished it in Letty's face, cut the telephone wire, picked up the canvas bag from under the table where he'd dropped it, and ducked out the back door. Letty rushed to the window, watched as he opened the garage door and drove out in the student-driver car, vanishing with a squeal of tires down Shadyside Line.

Letty excused herself to the ladies, went up to the bathroom, and stayed there ten minutes before returning to create havoc among her friends with her explosive revelation.

The police officer who arrived in response to Letty's 911 call on Myrtle's car phone was polite, but with an edge of impatience to his voice. "Sorry, ma'am. Those are the facts." He'd checked Letty's story before coming to the house.

"But that's impossible. I was there!"

"Ma'am, there was no bank robbery. At the Union National or any other bank."

Letty could have wept. Did the officer think she was imagining it all? That she was senile, or worse? "But what about poor Mr. Overbeck?"

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"We talked to him, ma'am. Somebody called him at the garage and told him you were ill and were canceling your driving lesson. He closed at noon and went to a car auction in Centerville. When he got back, the student-driver car was parked in the lot. He's never heard of this Stanley guy, but said his description matched that of a kid who said his name was Joe Gomolka when he came around looking for work a couple of weeks ago. Overbeck didn't hire him, but the kid kept coming back, making a pest of himself. He could have known where the keys were kept and the driver instruction schedule."

"But what could have possessed him to perpetrate such a cruel hoax?"

The officer shrugged. "Probably a nut case."

Or am I the nut case, thought Letty, *is that what you're thinking?* Never had she felt more acutely the absence of Oliver. Never had his comfort and support been more sorely needed.

It was growing dark when Letty was at last alone, and it was still raining. She'd taken a couple of aspirins and lain down. But she couldn't relax. Her phone wouldn't be repaired until next morning, so she couldn't call anyone. She had never felt so alone.

She thought about Ernie Overbeck and of how alike he was in so many ways to Oliver, with the same capacity to reassure and sympathize. She wished she could talk to him, but of course the phone was dead. And suddenly, lying there, she was possessed by an audacious thought. She knew she should put the idea straight out of her mind, but once it was lodged there, its appeal was irresistible.

She sat in the driver's seat of the Mercedes for a few moments gathering her courage before putting the key in the ignition and starting the engine. It responded with a reassuring purr.

She was progressing smoothly along Shadyside Lane before it entered her mind that she was driving with only a learner's permit, without a licensed driver at her side, and with an expired inspection sticker on the windshield. She did not allow such considerations to trouble her. She was behind the wheel of her own car, and the knowledge produced a feeling of heady excitement.

Traffic was light and Market Street, when she turned into it, almost deserted. It occurred to her that the garage might be closed, but as she approached it was cheered to see a light behind the half-shut blinds of the office window. The wide door of one of the bays was open.

She parked on the street, gripped her umbrella, and opened the car door. She hurried through the rain into the shelter of the bay. Several feet away, the door into the office was slightly ajar, light pouring out the small window alongside it. Letty stopped short, catching her breath, scarcely believing what she saw.

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Ernie Overbeck and the youth who called himself Stash were clearly visible. Letty crept closer, knowing she could not be seen from inside the lighted office. Their voices reached her through the slightly open door. Clearly, they were arguing. She could hear every word.

"You could have waited," Ernie Overbeck was saying in a tone of voice Letty had never heard him use.

"Like hell. Once those old biddies barged in, it was a washout. I knew that. I just wanted outa there."

Letty couldn't move, although every instinct urged her to retreat.

"You know how much I wanted that Mercedes," said Overbeck. "I already had a buyer."

"Yeah, well, it was a stupid plan."

"It was a good plan, if you hadn't blown it. Lost your nerve. I brought you here to do a job and you screwed up."

Stash's voice rose higher. "Well, don't try to screw me, man. You promised me a grand. I want it. I gotta blow town tonight. You got that much in your cash drawer."

"Don't try that on, kiddo. You didn't earn it, you don't get it."

"You'd rather I blew the whistle on you, Ernie?"

"And hang yourself? Be real."

"I mean it, man. Pay up," cried Stash.

"Get lost, kid."

What happened next, Letty would have nightmares about. She watched in horror as Stash pulled out that wicked switchblade knife and thrust it into Ernie Overbeck's chest. Ernie staggered back and fell to the floor. As Stash made for the cash drawer, Letty fled.

The police station was only a block away. Letty gasped out her story. The police went into action. A pretty young policewoman brought Letty a cup of coffee. But it was Oliver she wanted, Oliver's broad shoulder to rest her head upon. Her inner voice cried out to him.

"Oh, Oliver, my dear, you'd never *believe* the day I've had."

Letty stopped at a nearby drugstore and went inside to use the pay phone just beyond the door. She simply had to call Violet. When she came out, a patrolman was standing by the car.

"This your vehicle, ma'am?"

"Yes, it is, Officer."

"You know the registration's out of date? *And* the inspection sticker?"

"I know, yes. But I can explain."

"May I see your license, ma'am?"

Letty could not help herself. She began to laugh. To laugh so hard tears came into her eyes. ●

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Art by Jason C. Eckhardt

ANGEL OF WRATH

by Joyce Carol Oates

And seeing her for the first time *I knew.*

How she crossed the park pushing a baby stroller and I had been called to that place quick before the church bell ceased its tolling as it was rare that any sign called to me now that I am grown *Go! Go where you are needed, Gilead* and in a patch of hot sunshine where the elm trees had been sawed down she lifted her hand to shield her eyes frowning and squinting and the movement alerted me to see her and our eyes met and she smiled at me knowing I could not be a stranger.

I did not follow her then. Never did I follow her but was drawn in her wake like a scrap of paper in the wind. My head bowed I continued through the shabby park. Patriot Park it is called. Stricken with shyness and joy I cast my eyes down in the comfort of knowing we would meet again, always we would know each other.

And seeing her the next day *I knew.*

At the sandstone steps of the library where they are crumbling she hesitated trying to lift the front of the stroller as others passed

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by not seeming to notice the young mother and soundless as a cat I came beside her and aided her bare slender arms in lifting the stroller and she glanced up at me startled and grateful—"Thank you!" And the baby in the stroller stared up at me, blue eyes widened in recognition. *He knows. He, too.* I did not speak for the hurt in my throat. I did not look at her close up for I did not dare. Nor smile with the ease of others for I could not trust my mouth, that twitches and twists like an alive thing. And I am so tall and clumsy looming over her and the baby, what if I slipped, stumbled and injured them somehow. So like a blind man (knowing my face was ugly in blotches and burning) I entered the library before her and walked quickly away not glancing back. My breathing like a dogs that has been running. I was staring at a display of audio books and young adult books and there was a shelf of books in shiny new jackets and their words mocked me for these were words I could not speak aloud. And there was a roaring in my ears. For the librarians in this place might know me. I had not entered such a place since grade school when we were made to go. Women of that kind staring at me. They were my teachers, staring in dislike. Before my voice was taken from me, even then I was shy. You are not trying, Gilead. Because once I held the book to my face but my eyes were shut tight and teeth clenched and bared.

If you dont try how can you read?
If you dont read how can you grow up?
If you dont grow up how can you *be?*

Three women, and three knives. In a dream I came to them. The knife handles were carved of a hard dark wood and inside the wood a small heart beat. These handles that when you closed your fingers around them a terrible thrill of strength poured through your arms and into your heart.

Gilead I was named, for a holy place.

Gilead I was named by my mother whose face was bright-blinding as the sun.

In January of 2002, Carroll & Graf Publishers brought out *Beasts*, a suspense novella by Joyce Carol Oates set in a New England college town. In the past, most of Ms. Oates's mystery and suspense writing appeared under the pseudonym Rosamond Smith. Fans of her work who are also regular readers of crime fiction will probably be pleased to see the illustrious Oates byline on work published in our genre. †

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Gilead you must never tell my mother had no need to command me and so I did not, and will not.

On my head a grey baseball cap and on the cap a Happy Face button.

Its a yellow round face like a sun with just dots for eyes but a big wide smile. It makes you smile to see it. Dr. Cotton praises me for "optimism." But next time I saw the woman in Patriot Park she did not smile at me as before but turned away. Pushing the baby stroller quickly away. You dont tell *I love you* to one who has turned from you. You dont tell *I have come to protect you.* Or *I am Gilead who loves you.*

Next-door to the brick rowhouse where she lived was a barking dog. A heavy breed looking like a mix of German shepherd and Doberman. Its collar was tied to a chain that slid along a clothesline so the dog could rush one way and the other, furious to break free and do injury to the mother and her baby as they passed on the walk to their door. From across Seneca Street in an alley I observed. I felt wrath rising in me, to see such a sight. I was working then at the post office (at the rear, where the trucks come in) and my shift ended at five and during those hours loading and unloading I thought of her and what it meant that she had lifted her hand to greet me in the park, she had smiled at me that first time, in the joy of recognition.

Later she would seem to forget. But I knew better.

In the night in my bed she would come to me not in sin stroking my body as some women and girls have done but to watch over me as I slept. Sometimes she held her baby cradled in her arms and would open her clothes to nurse it but I couldnt see then, a blindness came over me. For it was forbidden for me to see. And I could not move but must lay still. There was a murmur *Gilead, Gilead* but no words passed between us.

Yet in the day when she saw me she would not smile and her eyes were dimmed now with fear and dislike of me. These words sprang from her lips so shocking almost I could not comprehend.

What do you want with me
Are you following me
Leave me alone *please*
I am asking you—*leave me alone*

Beautiful eyes they were but ringed with shadow. And the skin of her face like bruised fruit. Crossing a street and I followed (at a distance, not close) and she stumbled at the curb and I watched after her to see that no harm came to her but did not follow her for

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I understood it was the wrong time. She was alone without the baby. It excited me to see her alone and to know that she was a mother who nursed her baby, inside her clothes was the womans body, her breasts beautiful and hidden from the world except not from me. The clothes were mens clothes. She wore a shirt and jeans and a backpack. She entered one of the old granite buildings that belong now to the community college. On her feet were sandals that slapped against the steps. Her oak-colored hair was tied back in a ponytail that swept her shoulders. Her face turned from me in a fiery blur. She looked young as a schoolgirl though a grown woman and a mother and I wished to call after her as youd call after a child to tease and comfort.

Fear of me, of Gilead—why?

GRADY was the name on the mailbox. But I was cautious to say this name aloud not knowing if it was a mans name, a husbands name, and not hers. Saying aloud the name of one who is beloved, or saying aloud the name of one who is my enemy. I could not know.

She is a small-boned woman but not a weak woman. No! Strong in her will as in her limbs. When I was close to her on the library steps she came hardly to my shoulder. And weighing maybe 100 pounds less than me.

A big boy Gilead has been called. Young in the face and in the heart. My hair that falls into my eyes, the color of cornsilk its been called. (By women.) And my eyes the bluest blue. (That was why her baby smiled at me, recognizing me.) So sometimes in the street girls turn to watch me, and smile. I have the use of a pickup truck and if Im driving, a girl will stick out her thumb to hitchhike as a joke, but I never stop. A flame passes over my face, but I never stop. And when I first came to County Health Services and to Dr. Cottons office I saw her surprised eyes on me in a way you dont expect for a woman of her age, beyond forty or even fifty.

It was a Family Court judge who ruled I must put myself "under the care" of Dr. Cotton "in lieu of incarceration" at Red Bank State Facility for Men. Dr. Cotton is my friend I believe. Calling me *Gilead* in a calming voice as you might speak to a nervous horse not wishing it to buck or to bolt. A horse that has been hurt, and is capable of giving hurt. Never would Dr. Cotton touch me to soothe me if I became agitated but there is a wish in her eyes to touch me, my long hair, my skin that flares up in rashes, my fingers with dirt-ridged nails that drum drum drum on the edge of her metal desk.

My appointment with Dr. Cotton is every other Monday in the county building. Five-thirty to six P.M. Upstairs past social service,

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public assistance, tax assessor, county clerk, death certificates, marriage licenses, rodent and insect control. Seven more months assigned to Dr. Cotton who speaks of "trauma"—"adjustment"—"restorative surgery" and to this I make myself smile politely but say nothing. For never will Gilead enter any hospital (where I cant remember being taken, by ambulance its said) again in my life and be "put to sleep" and my throat cut with a knife another time. *I will never.*

Gilead, when will you speak to me of your mother? Dr. Cotton asks, it has been years now and that woman cant hurt you anymore. A hot stabbing anger goes through me that this ugly old bitch would speak of my mother in such a way as if she knew my mother and had the right and my fingernails are drumming hard on the edge of the metal desk so I wont rise from my chair to grip her bony shoulders and shake! shake! shake! until her eyes roll in their sockets and her neck is snapped. You need to speak of your mother, of what she did to you, Dr. Cotton says, to get beyond it. Gilead?

I am smiling like the Happy Face. I duck my head like I dont understand. For never have I said who it was that did this to me, and there is no way of them knowing truly if I never speak. And I will not speak, because it would give a false impression of my mother who loved her son and wished to protect him. It would confuse the person she was that single time with the person she was truly, in her soul.

Gilead, are you listening? Dr. Cotton asks, frowning. Her face like a wrinkled glove. You are twenty-three years old. You are no child now.

The scarred flesh and cartilage in my throat is a knot that wont let me speak. When Im excited my mouth twists like an alive thing. My head and shoulders twitch. Boys would laugh at me, my age, but never girls. Girls and women would shrink from me. But there was pity in their eyes too. It was believed I might suffer from "epilepsy"—"brain seizure"—"asthma." There were "chemical toxins" in my blood. My mother believed Id inherited a curse of the blood from her and from her people and now she has passed away that secret has passed with her.

Sure I have seen Gilead in the mirror red-faced and trying to speak, a spectacle of pity and ugliness. I have never blamed anyone from shrinking from such a spectacle. *But I am not angry* I would wish to explain. *Gilead is not angry not ever.*

But I am angry on the part of others. Of the innocent, and the cast down. I am the Angel of Wrath protecting the one I love.

Please dont follow me
I will call the police if
Ive seen you following me *please dont*

This time I was downtown and saw her and could not prevent

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following her it was an accident I swear. But when she saw me she stopped as if shed been struck by a blow and called to me in a voice hoarse like something scraped asking what did I want from her, why the hell was I following her, Id better stop, Id better stop or shed call the police, she was angry now and I shrank back pulling my cap low over my forehead for I was ashamed, that she should deny me. She knew me, yet she would deny me. Why? *Gilead, I am Gilead, you know me.* Like there was blindness in her eyes. I could not comprehend. Shed run into the five and dime store and I came through the alley to the rear and when she appeared there leaving by the back door (but everybody knows there is a back door) she stopped again staring at me like a hunted rabbit and I tried to smile to comfort her, I tried to speak to explain but she began to scream saying shed call the police God damn me shed have them arrest me so I backed away my face blotched and burning in shame.

Little Mother! Yet she was exhausted sometimes from the baby. The babys father was nowhere near and she was alone with the baby and sang to the baby sometimes until the baby fell into a doze but at other times the baby would not sleep but cried, cried. And my heart went out to her *Little Mother, I am here to help you. Dont turn me away.*

Where the shade was unevenly pulled and did not come to the window sill or where there was a rip in the shade like a lightning flash, there I could observe. Smiling to see her and to know she could not see me where for hours in the alley behind her house I watched over her. I was sleepless, I did not require sleep. She lived in a first-floor apartment at 929 Seneca Street in a rowhouse of weatherworn dark brick. I had reason to think she had moved there only recently for there were unpacked cartons in all the rooms I could see and not much furniture. For a while there was a telephone on a bare floor, and a stool beside it. She would make calls from this phone but rarely would it ring. Sometimes talking on the phone she would begin to cry and strike her thigh with her fist and I wanted to stop her from hurting herself and give comfort to her but I dared not.

In the house next door were two men and these were the owners of the dog that barked so much and lunged and snapped its teeth at anyone who passed by. These were men a few years older than Gilead who treated their dog cruelly and would not keep it inside when they were gone. And they were often gone.

By day it happened I observed how she pushed the baby out in his stroller trying to move quietly and quickly so the dog would not be wakened but the dog would wake and bark in fury with glistening bared teeth and later when she returned she would

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take care to approach her house from the other side yet the dog would be waiting and like a maddened creature sniffing blood it would bark, bark, bark and throw itself against its chain to terrify her and to make the baby cry. And calmly Gilead thought *The Angel of Wrath is required.*

Thirty-five hours later the dog lay dead.

It had been killed by night and its bloodied, motionless body discovered by its owners in the early morning. Around its neck the frayed collar, and attached to the collar the chain. Already in the early heat of the day a swarm of blue-glittering flies had gathered. The dogs eyes were open, glassy. Its skull had been crushed and brains and blood leaked out onto the grassless soil.

A first blow struck to the dogs bony head must have been so powerful no one heard a death-cry. No one heard a struggle. A succession of blows struck with a heavy weapon like a tire iron. Or so the policeman who came to investigate believed.

This weapon was not found. Whoever had crushed the dogs skull was not found. The dogs owners were youngish bearded men with tattoos on their forearms and wary eyes and in the neighborhood it was believed that they dealt in drugs And that they killed their own dog out of disgust with its crazed barking and a wish not to continue to feed it.

In her mailbox I left a Happy Face card. Inside the envelope some dog hairs, coarse and bristly.

Dr. Cotton smiled to see me so happy. For I was whistling, and I had washed my hair and combed it back from my forehead to fall in two wings streaked with flame beside my face. And I had shaved. Gilead how handsome you look, Dr. Cotton said. Yet there was trouble with my job at the post office, they reported to Dr. Cotton I had been missing some hours. I pulled my baseball cap down onto my forehead feeling shamed in this womans eyes. As if she might read my thoughts and would know of the dog and I would have to hurt her to destroy that knowledge. I did not want to hurt Dr. Cotton, shes an old woman who has been good to me.

By grunts and gestures then, pointing to my mouth, my nose, my throat, I told Dr. Cotton that I had been sick, a bad cold. I coughed and made a sneezing noise and Dr. Cotton said she would call them but I was angry to be forced by her to lie because *Gilead is a man of truth.*

I would quit that job and get another loading and unloading at Sears.

It was never hard for me to get jobs. I was strong, and just to look at me youd know. Eager to obey and not minding hard work if

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I was spoken to kindly and what I had to do was explained.

The Sears job would pay twenty cents more an hour than the post office. The Sears near Seneca Street. I would take this for a sign.

Because of the dog I had reason to believe she would be kindly to me now. I had reason to believe that she would ask me to come to her house, to the door openly, and she would allow me inside. And the baby would laugh to see me, and play with my fingers. Blue-eyed baby, Gileads own. (I did dream of this. In the daytime I would begin to remember.) But when I dialed her number from a pay phone in the bus station it was not what I expected.

By this time I knew that GRADY was not a husbands name. There was no man who came to the house at 929 Seneca Street in the hours I had observed. Her first name was KATRINA Id learned. Id practiced speaking this name—"Ka-*treen*-ah"—shaping my lips with care, before the mirror. Instead when the phone was lifted by her a voice came—"Marsh?" A voice hopeful and eager as a young girls. "Marsh? Is that you?" I drew breath to say her name—"Ka-*treen*-ah"—but my throat closed up and she knew it was not "Marsh" and could not be anyone other than Gilead whod killed for her and loved her. And I could hear her breathing sharp and ragged and in the background the baby was fretting and it was a shock to me how suddenly Katrina began to sob—"Leave me alone, why are you doing this, I didnt ask you to h-hurt that poor dog, how could you do such a thing, you're crazy, leave me alone *I will call the police"*—and this was so surprising to me, even to beg forgiveness of her I could not speak except in choked sounds like drowning *Uh-uh-uhhh K'tree-ah* and she slammed down the receiver hard as if wishing to break it.

Yet I did not consider that Katrina was ungrateful to me. I did not believe shed fail to love me. Id seen her face in the park that day. For it was only a matter of time, I would be patient. *Little Mother* my thoughts flew to her *I love you. I have come into the world as Gilead to love you.*

And I would wonder of "Marsh." Again and again I would hear her voice lifted eager and hopeful—"Marsh."

"Marsh"—the babys father (?).

"Marsh"—"Marsh"—this name I spoke aloud again, again, again until the very sound of it was harsh as glass breaking, and stirred my wrath. Wishing the man stood before me like the vicious craven dog trapped by its chain and nowhere to hide.

Through the summer I waited for her to summon me and she did not and always I kept at a distance waiting for a sign and so it

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was a shock to me, one day she called the police and they came and I knew this to be a fact, that shed called, they informed me blunt and mocking in my face. They called me Gilead twisting their mouths so the sound of that name was ugly. Shed taken the baby to the Lots of Tots Day Care Center in the church basement on Cicero Street as she did on Mondays and Wednesdays in the early afternoon and rode the South Avenue bus to downtown (to the community college, I knew, though I did not follow her that day for I had to work at Sears for all that day) and when at 6 P.M. I was waiting on the church steps out of the rain sitting with my knees to my chest and my head turned to the side resting on my knees (for I was tired, that day) there came suddenly before me two policemen in uniforms, and spoke sternly with me demanding to know my last name and to see my ID and telling me there was a complaint by a woman that I was "stalking" her and calling her on the phone and this must stop or I would be arrested. I was surprised and did not put up any resistance. You dont put up resistance to the police, they have weapons and will beat you bloody-headed and kick your ribs and between your legs. I had not time to think of Katrina, why she would call police knowing that I loved her and would never mean harm to her and I tried to speak to explain but the sounds that came from my mouth were strange and garbled and I saw in the policemens faces that look of pity and disgust. Trying to say *I love Katrina, Katrina knows me, I would never hurt Katrina* but all that came out were ugly choking noises. I began to twitch and shake like palsy and one of the policemen said Whoaa! Whats wrong here. They put their hands on me and steadied me and walked me down the steps forcing my legs to move like a puppet. I was strong but two policemen together as tall as me and heavier than me were stronger and I did not resist when they slammed me against the side of the police car for I believed that Katrina would be watching and her heart would go out to me in sorrow. In the back of the car I tried to explain *She would not do this* I told the policeman who turned to watch me through the wire divider *Shes my friend.* I believed this policeman understood, he seemed ashamed to have hurt me but with the other beside him he laughed at me saying the woman wanted nothing to do with me—"N-O: no-thing"—and if I wasnt careful Id be put away behind bars with the other crazies so better mind my own business, O.K., keep away from the woman and dont call her, O.K.? See, Gilead, youre not the kind. O.K.?

Hung my head and smiled, O.K.

Immediately I telephoned her from the pay phone to whisper just *I love you, Im sorry Katrina* and quickly hang up before she could speak.

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For she had not told the police of the dog killed by Gilead for her sake. That was the secret between us, and the sign.

And for three days and three nights I stayed away from 929 Seneca as the police commanded and I did not see Katrina Grady to follow her though the need to see her was so strong, almost I could not breathe. For I was fearful that something bad would happen to her and the baby and I would not be there to protect her. Gilead what has happened to you, Dr. Cotton was surprised to see my appearance, unwashed and unshaven, and my work clothes soiled, she knew of "the complaint" as she called it, and a knife blade turned in my heart that there could be no secret from this woman, the police and social workers and therapists share their information, theres nowhere to hide in this county. She wanted to talk about "the complaint"—"the young woman"—"the police"—whether there was some misunderstanding, and quickly I nodded my head yes, yes there was some misunderstanding, I felt tears of hurt and rage spring into my eyes, *I was not to blame.* Dr. Cotton said carefully that if a young woman did not want me to speak with her, follow her, telephone her of course I must not. Gilead is not that kind of person, to behave rudely to any woman, Dr. Cotton said. I shut my eyes recalling my mother and how my mother knew always what Gilead was capable of, nothing of Gilead could surprise her, she would not be surprised now that the police had come for me, my belly and ribs were covered in ugly yellow bruises from where theyd slammed me against their car. No explanation was required for my mother to act, and never was there any explanation. Dr. Cotton did not comprehend this. My mother would have scorned her. In my chair I was hunched over pulling my baseball cap down low on my head to hide my eyes that were bloodshot and shamed but I told her yes, I knew.

I did not tell her that Katrina Grady and I had known each other long before this lifetime. That Katrina knew this fact in her heart but had forgotten. But she would know again, one day.

I did not tell Dr. Cotton any of these things. For I would not wish to harm her, yet might harm her if she knew. If she knew what she had no right to know. I would not tell her about my mother and the knife and what it did to me because she had no right to know. It was for Dr. Cottons protection. I am a vessel of mercy as well as wrath. I am one who respects and protects women. I would not harm a woman. I would not frighten a woman. Not a lady like Dr. Cotton, and one her age. But if something went wrong, it would not be my fault. I would drive a spike through her forehead to stop her mouth chattering. I would take hold of her wrinkled old throat in both my hands and squeeze, squeeze, squeeze till her doctor-brains seeped out at one end and

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her guts at the other. I would use the tire iron to crush that skull like a flowerpot beneath the thin crinkly dyed-dark hair and I would dig the heel of my boot into the hairy hole between her legs, hard. This would be to cease her words like yellow bile in my ears. It would be for no other reason. For I knew that Dr. Cotton was my friend. And so to prevent the bad things happening, I held myself in my chair to keep from rocking side to side as my teachers had scolded me for doing when I was a boy and I told her Yes, yes Dr. Cotton. Yes you are right.

Dialing the number I had memorized. Waiting for the phone to be lifted! I was trembling, my breath came short. But the phone rang and rang. I hung up and dialed again and the phone rang and no one answered and this would be a time when Katrina Grady would be home, I believed. Another time I tried, and later. And no answer. And so I went to Seneca Street and stood across from the house for a long time staring at the darkened windows. A sickness came into my heart, *she was not there.*

And the next day, and the next she was gone. At the rear of the house in the alley I stood to look into the windows, seeing no one. But no sign that she had departed. For there were things of hers and the babys scattered about, and the cartons only just part-unpacked from her moving in. So I believed she had not moved away to another place though there was the danger of that, I had not comprehended until now. I was sick with fear that I would lose her, out of cowardice. And if she was returned to me it would be a sign I must not lose her a second time out of cowardice. Never again.

Had there been any woman like this in Gileads life before, no there had not. A woman for whom Gilead would die, and would kill to protect. Thered been girls and some women who had smiled at him, and pursued *him.* Not believing or not minding that Gilead is "slow"—"strange." For they saw in me a gentleness and goodness and a strength to protect and my hair burnished like the sun and my eyes and heavy jaw, and at church sometimes in the pew the ray of sunshine would fall upon me, like a blessing of God you could not mistake. And my hurt throat. The piteousness of my speech. Gilead would never speak cruelly of anyone, for Gilead cant speak. And Gilead cant write, or read. A pure child of God youd think him.

Some of them, theyd touch my wrist.

And some would stroke my hair or brush it off my face and I would hold myself very still, stricken in shyness.

At last she returned after six days and six nights absence and I gave thanks to God on my knees she was returned to me, and safe.

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And the baby. Gileads baby, you could see by the eyes. There was no mistaking this. Never would she leave me again, I vowed. I believed shed gone away to seek out another man but now she was returned to me. My heart was filled with tenderness and forgiveness for *Katrina Grady* whod come back of her own free will to me.

After the police spoke with me I behaved with more caution. Id been a hunter as a boy sometimes. I knew the caution of the hunter not to be seen or smelled. And so if Katrina called the police seeing me or believing she saw me, I was not there on Seneca Street when they arrived, or on any street close by. And if sometimes she called the police in the night hearing a sound like the wind rattling the house or noise from next-door or somebody in the alley outside, believing it was Gilead, and it was not Gilead, but I was in my own bed (where the police would find me if they came by my address), then it would begin to happen that the police would not always trouble to come, not each time the upset woman called them. So it was in the fall and the early winter of the year. For it became clear to them that Gilead was no threat. Not the kind to do harm, youd call him "harmless." And in time, Katrina would cease to call the police. There was a futility in calling the police. She would change her telephone number and each time it would be "unlisted" and yet somehow after a week or some days Gilead would discover the new number and would call her just to hear her voice uplifted in hope before fear entered it, and dread, and shed curse—"Damn you *leave me alone*"—and slam down the receiver. I came then to see she didnt mean this so I took no offense by it, or hurt. Recalling how my mother had hurt me but out of a definite purpose and love. Knowing that there would come the hour when Katrina understood at least *Gilead loves me, and the baby. He has come into the world to love us.*

I was patient, I would wait. All Gileads life until now has been waiting.

That winter was the time of change in Katrina. A change I could not interpret at first. Where before shed run from me or hide or complain to others about me now seeing me (on the street, in the park, in a parking lot or store) she would stop to stare at me, and sometimes her mouth would twist in a strange smile. A smile of mockery, scorn. Her mouth was pale like skin worn raw. Her eyes were not beautiful eyes now—though to Gilead, they would always be beautiful as on that first day in Patriot Park—but hollow in their sockets. Her hair was long and tattered and needed washing. Sometimes she would stamp at the ground as youd stamp to drive away an unwanted dog. She would laugh, a harsh sound like a shovel scraping stones. "You! Think Im blind I dont see you, I *do.* I know your name Gilead you pathetic creep Im telling you *leave me*

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alone or Ill kill you."

She would clench her fist and strike her own thigh, saying these terrible words. And I would blush for her, her blindness.

One evening in the 7-Eleven parking lot in almost a quiet voice, coming to stand about ten feet from me where I stood unmoving, my hands in my windbreaker pockets, and my cap pulled low on my head, she said, "Im going to be frank with you, Gilead. Youre stalking me and I dont like it. Trying to say you 'love' me when you dont know me. You dont! Dont know the first thing about me. See, asshole, if you knew me youd feel sorry for me. Im a mess, thats what I am. Im nobody a guy would want to stalk unless hes a real loser. Got it? Am I getting through to that dimwit brain of yours? My babys father cant stand the sight of me. He sure as hell isnt stalking me. He told me under no circumstances youre gonna have this baby, and when I said I would, he said O.K. count me out. So I did. I have. So go to hell, you. Youre a worse joke than I am, got it? Asshole."

Bursting into tears, and running into the store before I could speak.

Then in December, she shot me in the leg.

And I fell from the back stoop of her house, in the alley, moaning like a hurt dog, and right away she came outside crying "Oh God, oh God"—"I'm sorry, oh God"—and I grabbed onto the railing to pull myself up staring at the dark blood seeping through my work pants, the bullet had grazed the calf of my right leg and torn the flesh. It was a small revolver she had, she would show me later, a .22-caliber that can do some wicked harm close up. A bullet doesnt hurt but slams into you like a hammer, thats the surprise of it. The shock. The actual pain will come later so quickly I told Katrina I was O.K., tried to tell her, the words mangled and choked and yet, this was the wondrous thing, Katrina seemed to comprehend them. For the first time she comprehended me, and I could feel the warmth of her hands on me. *Katrina Grady was beside me, and touching me.* She helped me to stand to lean on her. She was saying she would call an ambulance to take me to the hospital, she was terrified I would bleed to death but I told her no, I was not hurt bad, I was O.K. She was ashamed, she said. Shed been drinking and now the police would know it and shed be sent to jail and lose her baby. Shed been drinking and now she was sober and scared what would happen. The gun wasnt registered, shed bought it on the street. Oh God she was scared shitless she would be arrested and her baby taken from her.

She begged me not to tell, and I told her no, I would never tell.

I told her I loved her, I would never tell.

She brought me into her kitchen where the air was being

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warmed by an opened oven. We rolled up my pants leg and Katrina washed the wound and tied a towel around it, tight. There was no bullet in the flesh, the bullet had gone into the ground outside. Oh God, oh God she was murmuring. Like a woman in her sleep praying. She gave me a beer to drink and she was drinking from a can herself. She gave me three aspirins to swallow down, and she swallowed two herself. We were shivering and trembling and staring at each other, not knowing what had happened exactly, that Gilead had been shot, standing on Katrinas back porch hed been shot, shot through a window, but was now in this warm kitchen drinking a Coors and his wound being bound. Wild! You had to marvel, and to smile. This was worth any amount of blood and pain to come. And the blue-eyed baby that had slept through it all was still sleeping in the next room. After about five minutes a squad car came along Seneca Street. Police were knocking at doors asking about gunshots. Somebody had called police reporting "gunshots." Katrina threw on a raincoat over her blood-splashed nightgown and went to the front door when they pounded on it and I was in the kitchen not daring to breathe hearing her voice scared as a young girls—"Gunshots? You mean just now? Oh God, I hear gunshots all the time. In this neighborhood. I almost dont listen anymore. But I didnt hear any tonight. I mean, I dont think I did. Ive been asleep. My baby is asleep. I wish I could help you, Officers, but I guess I cant."

Soon after that Katrina sent me away. Back through the alley where Id come. Now there was pain but I didnt feel it, my heart was filled with joy that God had sent such an unexpected blessing to me, I could forgive this woman I loved.

"I shot you, dont you hate me? Gilead? Dont you hate me? I shot you." She spoke wistfully and in wonder. We would examine the moist wound in my leg, that scabbed over in days. Like a wound made with a serrated knife it seemed to me. I didnt mind the pain, you can take pain inside you like freezing air, to warm.

She said, "I would expect you to hate me. I dont understand you, I guess."

I cast my eyes down, a hot flush came into my face. Almost I could not move, in the holiness of the moment.

That night Katrina fed me supper. She hadnt told me to come around but I came to the front of the house this time, and stood on the cracked front walk until, shading her eyes by a window, she saw me.

She spooned onto my plate a cheese-and-macaroni casserole with tiny hot dogs in it that I removed, carefully, with my fork. For I dont eat meat any longer. Id worked in a slaughterhouse in Port Oriskany for three months when I was eighteen. Katrina watched

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me saying, "Theres a purity in you, Gilead. After I shot you, coming back to me."

She gave me beer from the refrigerator. We would drink together. In his baby chair blue-eyed Reuben stared blinking at us, waving his pudgy hands. He was a hungry baby, Katrina fed him many times a day. He was growing fast she said. He was all her happiness.

His father had wished him to die she said. In the womb, to be sucked out and disposed of like trash.

Katrina said, "Maybe I dont deserve this baby. I dont deserve to live. Maybe."

I didnt like to hear such words. No! I told her.

She said, "Except for Reuben. I think, what would happen to my baby if I died, and I know for sure I am not going to die. Not for a long damn time."

It was then I spoke with her, as God might speak with her. The words came to me then. Not easily, but they came. Patiently she listened as I shaped these words with my mouth trying not to stammer or twitch my neck. "God is a spirit, Katrina. In you, and in me. And in Reuben."

Laughing she said, "Oh Gilead, bullshit. Thats sweet but bullshit. I know it, and you know it."

"I dont know it. No."

In Katrinas kitchen there were dazed flies on the ceiling and windowpanes. Waking up, in midwinter, to crawl out of the window sills. "These damn flies, is God in them?"

I could not reply to her mockery. I sat silent, eating.

She would speak in this way, and open another can of beer. She would eat a little and push her plate from her. She would lift the baby from his chair and take him to change his diaper and when she returned her face showed surprise that Gilead was there in her kitchen.

She laughed, and her eyes were bloodshot and set deep in her face. Tears glistened on her cheeks, I leaned across the table to wipe them with my fingertips and Katrina meant to shrink from me quick like a cat, but not quick enough.

There was a time I would help with the baby at last.

Katrina trusted me to hold him. My big hands cupping Reubens head and lower body in such gentleness, his blue eyes drowsy and sinking to sleep, his mouth wet with spittle, and a light shone up from his face onto mine, and I heard Katrina suck in her breath seeing us. Wanting to speak but she could not.

And there was a time Katrina took my wrist, that was so much bigger than she could wrap her fingers around, and led me into

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the kitchen to seat me, and said in a voice that trembled in excitement, "Gilead. You could help me."

I bent my head closer. Katrina would know, any word she said to me I would obey.

"Theres a man. Who hurt me. And wanted to hurt Reuben. He deserves punishment."

Yes, I said. Tell me his name.

Katrina was laying out snapshots on the table. Most were of her smiling and a man with nickel-colored eyes, a face that looked baked like clay, wavy dark hair worn long past his collar and a dark moustache, smiling and not-smiling. The mans arm was heavy around Katrinas slender shoulders. In one snapshot this man was posed alone in tinted glasses, a cigarette in his mouth, exhaling a cloud of pale blue smoke. At once I saw that this was the father of Reuben who had wished to destroy him in his mothers womb. And Katrina showed me the necklace of scars beneath her jaw like tiny stitches in the skin. From when he'd knocked her down, and a glass-topped table had shattered and cut her.

Katrinas fingers touched my scarred throat. The knot in my throat.

I waited for her to ask who did this to you, Gilead. Like Dr. Cotton eager to learn any evil of another. But seeing the look in my eyes she did not.

"Youve suffered, too. You know."

Katrina printed out his name—*Marshall Hagan*—and his address which was in a town twelve miles away. The university town it is called and "Marsh" lived near the campus where Katrina said hed been an adult student studying business. My heart was filled with wrath for this man, I took up the address and those snapshots of him in which he stood alone for (I reasoned) if something happened I would not wish Katrina to be involved.

Katrina told me not to do anything I did not truly wish to do, she would not send me on any mission contrary to my own heart, but already I was restless to leave. I knew what I would do: I had the tire iron, and I had the use of a pickup. I would act swiftly as always and be back to my home this night.

Katrina walked with me to the doorway and I was breathing quick and excited and my heart beating in my chest like a fist thudding there and Katrina laughed to feel it, touching my chest, her eyes lifting to mine wide and scared like a girls but she laughed saying, "Gilead, I will give you my blessing." On her tiptoes standing to touch my cheeks with her fingertips, and her lips.

The Angel of Wrath. Though acting quick and unerring and without emotion as youd wield a shovel or an ax performing a necessary task. Raising the tire iron in gloved hands to bring it down on

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the mans head, shoulders, his uplifted feeble hands and arms, that could not block such blows. That face I knew to hate with the righteousness of the Lord. A handsome face broken at once like an eggshell gushing blood. Break, and break, and break, the skull, and the neck, and the backbone shattered beneath the soiled T-shirt and Gilead was covered in a film of itchy sweat and breathing heavily but did not speak. From the man whod hurt Katrina Grady and had wished to destroy her baby there came a cry of hurt, surprise, astonishment at first but quickly there was no sound from him except low groans and whimpers and neighbors in the building would not hear for a TV was turned up and Gilead would leave by a back outdoor stairs as in stealth hed come in the night, bearing the bloodied tire iron wrapped in newspaper. And carefully he would wash it before returning to his home. For there would be a time when such an instrument of wrath would be required again, and Gilead would wish to be prepared.

Never would Katrina speak of that occasion. Never would Katrina ask. Taking Gileads big hands in her small trembling hands and staring up into his face knowing that Gilead would never speak of it either.

That secret lodged deep between us like scar tissue.

"Gilead. You must be cold. You must be famished."

Yet I wondered, would she bring me to her bed? As other girls and women have done, or tried. But I had not loved them as I love this woman now.

That evening she would nurse the baby who sucked hungrily at her breast. A milky-pale fat breast with pale blue veins that tore at my heart, to see for the first time. Like a young girl Katrina laughed at me, at the clumsiness in my face. She instructed me to sit down, to sit across from the bed, to come no nearer, not to move nor to speak, and so I sat very still on a stool leaning forward on my haunches, watching. If youd asked me what had been executed for the sake of such a vision I would not know how to answer, all was gone from my mind like a scrap of paper blown in the wind.

Around my head a fly buzzed groggy from waking in December, my hand brushed it away not knowing what it was. ●

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Farber Loses a Dependant

by Gordon Cotler

Detective Farber of the NYPD is becoming a regular series character for *EQMM*. His creator, Gordon Cotler, is an Edgar Allan Poe Award winner and a two-time Edgar nominee whose six mystery novels have all received starred reviews from either *Kirkus* or *Publishers Weekly*. Farber has two more cases ready for *EQMM* later this year. In this outing we find him investigating a case in his home neighborhood on New York's Upper West Side. ¶

If anything would make Farber reverse his decision not to put in his retirement papers it would be one more jarring phone call on a Sunday morning informing him of a homicide. He well understood the lack of warmth in his wife's farewell, half muffled by her pillow. Sylvie had left the Civil Service for the retail world and Sunday was her one day to sleep in. And at forty-seven, Farber himself no longer sprang out of bed quite so eager to grapple with the forces of evil. As a supervisor of homicide investigations on the Upper West Side of Manhattan, he might have opted to skip a visit to the scene in favor of reading the report of the detective in charge. He had done his share and more of hands-on sleuthing, and he had learned to let others perform the gritty work of gathering the facts. His skill had always lain in distilling those, anyway. But this murder had occurred within blocks of Farber's apartment, and the victim was the co-owner of a restaurant that was a neighborhood fixture. That made the case politically sensitive, and Quigley, the Chief of Detectives, would expect a first-hand report.

Farber knew the victim slightly, and during the ten minutes it took him to walk to the scene he reviewed that sketchy acquaintanceship. The late Mme. Rochaud and her husband ran a modest French bistro on a well-traveled cross street between Columbus

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and Amsterdam. In the Farbers' twenty years in the neighborhood they had eaten at the Dordogne possibly a dozen times. The prices were moderate and Farber was fond of the French fries. A hot heaping portion of *frites* came with almost every main course and he had often wondered aloud whether Frenchmen fried potatoes so well because their name was on the dish.

Sylvie was less enamored of the Dordogne, and not only because the *frites* were a needless encouragement to her husband's slowly but relentlessly growing pot. More than once she complained that the restaurant was out of the Twilight Zone, a retro relic in an increasingly boutiqued neighborhood. The room was long and dark and awkwardly skinny, with a small zinc bar up front and a stamped tin ceiling. Edith Piaf oozed nasal laments from the low-fi sound system, and blue-checked cloths adorned the tables. The décor stopped just short of wax-dripped candles in wine bottles. The sign out front proclaimed that the place was *fondée* in 1956, but Sylvie said she would have believed 1856. The average age of the clientele was probably something over sixty, and the two or three grizzled working-class Frenchmen invariably hunkered down at the bar over strange liquids in tiny glasses might have been in their early hundreds.

Mme. Rochaud—or Madame, as she was known to both staff and customers—handled the bar and the cash register, and she seemed to do both, as well as greet her clientele, without moving anything but her eyes. Madame was at least seventy, a squat, massive woman who reminded the censorious Sylvie Farber of a minimalist Eskimo sculpture; a faint line was all that separated her head from her neck, two quick strokes indicated her arms, and so forth. And from now on, Farber reminded himself, even the eyes wouldn't move.

Madame's husband and partner, M. Rochaud, the chef, was an unknown quantity, as he never emerged from the kitchen. The wait staff at the Farbers' last visit a few months back had included, as always, a muscular woman almost as old and almost as squat as Madame, who had to be her sister, as no one else, Sylvie once remarked, was likely to hire a woman whose very glance could curdle the *céleri rémoulade.* For the rest, Farber recalled, there were two young American women, one of them quite good-looking, and a Latino busboy who tried but failed to snatch Farber's plate before the last two frites had been devoured.

Having caught himself mentally checking off, as he routinely did in homicides, those people who were close to the victim, Farber abruptly terminated the idle exercise. From Detective Mancuso's brief report on the phone, it seemed this killing was almost certainly a robbery gone sour. Madame had been stabbed to death outside her establishment late last night. She had collapsed in the

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darkened entryway and her body had not been discovered until a patrol car spotted it soon after daylight. No cash, credit cards, or jewelry were found on her person.

The medical examiner, the body, and the Crime Scene Unit were all gone by the time Farber approached the Dordogne, and so were the curious. It was not yet ten A.M., and neither of the restaurants flanking the Dordogne—the cozy sushi joint and the high-tech vegetarian—showed any signs of life. Both had opened less than two years ago and they and the Dordogne, together with a brand-new Thai eatery a bit west, were already being called the uptown Restaurant Row. The newer places, Farber now noticed for the first time, made the Dordogne's shabby front look like the set for a low-budget French movie.

One police car still sat outside the restaurant, mainly to assure the locals that there would be no more killings on this block today. Inside, Detectives Mancuso and Brot were perched at the bar scribbling in their notebooks. An assortment of civilians—the Dordogne's staff—huddled at the far rear of the gloomy room still redolent of last night's garlic. They had obviously assembled here hastily; they looked as though they were wearing whatever had come to hand, and the chairs they sat on had been unstacked from tabletops. Madame must have been killed after the nightly cleanup.

Mancuso, a straight-ahead veteran, closed his notebook when he saw the lieutenant. "Mancuso," Farber said by way of greeting.

Mancuso gestured Farber to pull up the adjoining barstool. "Yeah, morning, Lieutenant," he said, his voice, as always, halfway between gravel and sandpaper. He followed Farber's gaze toward the rear. "There's not a hell of a lot to report. Those people weren't much help."

"How's the husband taking it?" Farber asked. He had already deduced that the widower was the round-shouldered, painfully thin man facing away from the others.

"M'soo Rochaud is either in total despair or doing mental handsprings now that the old broad's gone. Brot and I are split on that one. You get the deciding vote. Not that it matters. This wasn't a family killing. The old lady was knifed outside the front door. She stepped into the hands of a mugger and she must have been just mean enough to give him an argument."

"What did he take?"

"Whatever she had on her. The old man thinks maybe nothing."

"Nothing?"

"When she stayed late she didn't like to carry anything that could tempt a robber."

"She was the last one to leave the restaurant?"

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"Yeah, she'd stayed to go over some invoices and look at the customers' checks."

"In search of what?"

"A pattern of cheating from the wait staff, according to M'soo. Apparently the old lady knew everything that was served to every customer, including more bread."

Farber knew the drill. The waiter "forgets" to put the second glass of wine on the bill in the expectation that the customer's tip will recognize the saving. "So somebody was cheating?" he asked.

"Who knows?"

"Right," Farber said. "The old woman never got to report her findings. And who cares?" he added. "Fiddling with the check is hardly motive for a knife murder." He moved on. "Okay, so we're looking at a mugging—maybe by a perp who got sore because the old lady wasn't holding."

"Good point," said Mancuso.

"But a mugging on a busy street on a Saturday night, with no witnesses? Not a single nine-one-one call?"

"The kitchen closed at eleven," Mancuso said. "The Ethiopian dishwasher was the last of the help to leave. Near as I could understand him, he claims he stacked the chairs, mopped the floor, and said good night to the old woman at around midnight. Lieutenant, if you happened to be awake at that hour"—a half-joking reference to Farber's self-proclaimed advancing age—"you know that it was raining cats and dogs. The rain didn't taper off until dawn. So, just our luck, the streets must have been pretty much deserted when Madame R. stepped out the front door."

"That had to have been a hell of a rain. Not a single passerby or—?" Farber stopped abruptly. "Wait a second. Where was Jimmy?"

"Jimmy who?" Mancuso asked, and then, incredulous, "You mean the wino who hangs out at the corner?"

"He doesn't hang out," Farber said. There was no reason for Mancuso to know Jimmy the way Farber did. This was Farber's home neighborhood. "It's his place of business."

Mancuso nodded. "Panhandling, right. I know he's a neighborhood fixture, but at midnight, in that rain?"

"I don't expect he was working at that hour, but until winter hits he sacks out in the chiropractor's entryway. Two steps down and he's under the overhang. The doc doesn't come in mornings until Jimmy's well out of there. Not a bad setup. Not everybody gets to walk to work."

Brot had closed his notebook and was listening to the exchange. Now he pitched in. "That step-down entry is no more than a dozen yards up the street. If the wino heard sounds, and he wasn't too drunk to remember what he saw—"

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Farber cut him short. "I've seen Jimmy too drunk to stand, but he could still tell you if somebody walked by him in the last ten minutes from out of the neighborhood."

"You know him well, Lieutenant?" Brot asked.

"Real well."

In point of fact, Farber considered himself on Jimmy's roster of sponsors, one of a select group of regulars who could be counted on to feed coins and bills into his crumpled paper cup. Farber passed Jimmy's corner five or six times a week, and the toll, Sylvie once pointed out, came to something over a hundred dollars a year.

"Why do you do it?" she asked her husband. "Why support that poor man's drinking?"

"You think if I cut him off he won't drink?"

"You know what I mean. There are a lot better charities in this city."

"I like this one. No expensive mail solicitations, zero office overhead. And I get to see where my charity dollar goes."

"Exactly," said Sylvie. "He's the most wretched-looking drunk I've ever seen." She shuddered.

"His choice," Farber said. "I don't agree with it, but there it is."

Farber considered it a near miracle that Jimmy was alive and functioning after a dozen or more years on this corner. His drinking went in cycles, accelerating over a period of weeks until he looked like the portrait of Dorian Gray. When that happened, he would disappear for a bit only to return a few days later relatively—*relatively*—sober, to begin the cycle again. Drunk or nearly so, his unfailing greeting, whether or not largesse was forthcoming, was, "Hey, pal, how're you doing?" If Farber replied, "Not bad, how're *you* doing?" Jimmy invariably shot back, "I should hope to smile a herring." Farber once asked what this meant and Jimmy replied, "It means I should hope to smile a herring." Farber never asked again.

If Farber took a minute to stop and chat, they would talk about the quality of the day or the mood of the neighborhood. Jimmy was free with his opinions. He noted that too many expensive neckties were starting to pass his corner. "Not a good sign," he said darkly. When the sushi restaurant opened, he gave it six months, tops. "There's a sushi overload around here," he said. (A year later he admitted he was wrong.) He was the first to notice that the wife of the shoe repairman was pregnant. If Farber made a drop in the stove-in cup, Jimmy would send him on his way with, "Thank you, my friend." Otherwise it was, "Take care." Jimmy gave the neighborhood its human face.

To Brot and Mancuso, Farber said, "So you haven't talked to him?"

"Haven't even seen him," Brot said. "I guess the doctor doesn't

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come in on Sunday. Jimmy's chance to sleep in."

Farber wasn't familiar with Jimmy's Sunday routine. During the week he was on his corner by eight in the morning. "You two get on with your paperwork, I'll roust him," he said. He glanced toward the back of the restaurant. "And if you're finished with these people, why don't you let them go home?"

"We were saving them for you," said Mancuso.

"Why? I'm sure you've got whatever there was to get." Mancuso nodded his acceptance of the implied compliment and Farber said, "Come to think of it, I do have a question. Why didn't M. Rochaud report his wife missing when she didn't come home last night?"

Brot spoke up. "He didn't know she was missing until this morning. They sleep in separate rooms. You think that means anything?"

"It probably means, after fifty years," Farber said, "whatever works." And he was out the door and into the harsh sunlight.

He turned east, walking past the huge plate-glass window of Tada, the sushi restaurant. The place was just coming to life. An employee was folding napkins into fan shapes and Tada-san, the owner and chief sushi chef, was behind the bar and beginning his morning ritual—stroking his sushi knife against a whetstone to ready it for a day of precision fish-slicing. He leaned into the blade with his full weight, such as it was. Tada was so skinny and frail-looking, the big knife seemed to be wielding him.

A few yards beyond, Dr. Gerson's twenty-four-hour-a-day electric sign glowed above the short canopy that covered his step-down entry. Farber could see Jimmy lying at the bottom, curled toward the door. Farber didn't have to go down the steps. It took him less than a nanosecond to realize that his friend was not sleeping but dead.

He felt his mouth twist in shock and disbelief. Jimmy had spent long years abusing his body, nudging it towards death. Someone had saved him the final push, but there was little comfort in that for Farber. This was a loss, a real loss.

Sylvie's eyes glistened. A shocked "No!" escaped her and she blinked.

Farber had waited until they finished dinner and he had poured them each a cup of his famously brutal coffee to tell her the news of the day. Now he let a moment pass while Sylvie dealt with her distress. Then he said, "I didn't know you were a fan of Jimmy's."

"I wasn't a fan of his *drinking,*" she said. Grudgingly, she added, "Jimmy wasn't a bad person." She considered for a moment. "I never told you because I didn't want your head to swell. He once volunteered that I could have done worse than marry you."

"And how much did that persuade you to part with?"

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"Not a dime. You know I never encouraged him that way. And *he* knew it. But we sometimes exchanged a few words while I waited for the light to change." She put down her coffee. "What does it mean—Madame R. and Jimmy being killed the same night?"

"With the same knife, we're pretty sure, at about the same time. By the same hand, it stands to reason. At first, when all we had was the one body—the old woman's—we thought she was the victim of a robbery gone bad. With no physical evidence, the killer could have been any knife artist in the city. Finding him would have been a hell of a job."

"You think Jimmy's death makes it easier?"

"That's where I'm going. A robber wouldn't bother knifing a wino with a net worth of zilch unless he had a better motive than taking possession of a few quarters. With Jimmy a victim, we're presented with a whole new storyline."

Sylvie was starting to catch on. "You think Jimmy was killed because he was a witness to Madame's murder?"

"Why else? Some noise—a cry, a scuffle, whatever—must have cut into Jimmy's sleep. My guess is he stood up in the doctor's entryway in time to see the dirty deed. And got himself killed for his trouble. Would you like some more coffee?"

"I—I'm all right." Sylvie loathed Bernie's coffee, but she preferred choking down a cup of it to making the coffee herself. "So how does that change the equation? Okay, let's say Jimmy recognized the killer and had to be eliminated. But Jimmy recognized half the people in the neighborhood. You haven't narrowed the search for the killer an awful lot."

"Wrong. Once we believe the killer was known to Jimmy and not just a random mugger, another factor comes into play—the likelihood that the killer didn't just happen to show up with his knife at the Dordogne after midnight in a rainstorm, that he was someone who knew Madame was working late that night. If that's true, it shrinks our suspect list. It shrinks it a great deal."

Sylvie sat very still while she absorbed this. Farber took advantage of her silence. "Are you sure you wouldn't like another cup of coffee?" he asked.

In response to an invitation from Detective Mancuso, M. Victor Rochaud sat at a table in an interrogation room at the precinct house, his bony hands crossed, his spine rigid against the chair back. Detectives Brot and Mancuso sat opposite him, and Lieutenant Farber observed the scene through a two-way mirror. This was Wednesday afternoon, a couple of hours after M. Rochaud buried his wife in a cemetery near White Plains. Farber had not gone to the funeral, and Brot told him he hadn't missed anything. "Just a few people from the restaurant showed up—the old wait-

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ress, the second cook, the Ethiopian dishwasher, and a couple of ancient customers, both Frenchmen. Pretty bleak. That restaurant was the Rochauds' whole life. No children, no close friends, so far as we can tell."

Mancuso was asking the questions. "Thank you for coming in, M'soo Rochaud. We appreciate whatever help you can give us in our investigation."

"I don't see how I can help. I know nothing. Will you detain me long?" His accent reminded Farber of Charles Boyer, up an octave. "We are opening the restaurant tonight. There is a notice on the door and we must not disappoint our clientele." Whatever sorrow he may have felt about his wife's death he was managing to keep well hidden. He was bone-dry, leathery; maybe decades in a hot kitchen had steamed the juices out of him.

"We won't keep you a moment longer than necessary," Mancuso said. "And please let me thank you for your cooperation so far."

"For permitting you to test the knives from my kitchen? I told you that you would find no blood on them."

"But we did. The chemical tests we use are extremely sensitive." He took a beat to watch for a reaction. When there was none he added, "We found animal blood."

And of course, Farber thought, they had only Rochaud's word that no knives were missing from his kitchen.

"You want to examine knives? Look up and down my street," Rochaud was saying. "Every restaurant has many, even that vegetarian fake, Kaplan. Try to cut carrots with a spoon."

"Your neighbors. I was about to ask. Have you or your late wife had any disagreements with any of them? Personal or professional?"

"Disagreements? What else? Chefs are disagreeable, short of temper. It is a job qualification. I am a prime example. That grass-eater next door sends emissaries to try to buy my lease. Kaplan thinks the whole world salivates for turnips. I throw out his thugs. Bodily, when necessary. And how many times has that ignorant Japanese exploded into my establishment to complain of the odor of garlic?"

"He explodes into your restaurant? That little bit of a Japanese man? Mr. Tada?"

"It is always with a soft voice," Rochaud admitted, "with much bowing and false smiling and apologies. But underneath I know the explosion is there. Over *garlic,* can you imagine? Apparently there is no garlic in Japanese cooking, if you can call it cooking, which it often is not." He was in dead earnest. "Can you picture a cuisine, can you picture a *country,* without garlic? Barbarism!"

Wearily, Mancuso asked, "Did you ever feel actually threatened by him or Kaplan? By any of your competitors?"

"Competitors? We are in no way competitors. If you hunger for

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raw *haricots verts,* if you seek out that abomination soy beans, you do not have an understanding of the world's greatest cuisine. And vice versa."

Mancuso persisted. "But there has been friction lately? Quarrels?"

"Quarrels without end. I have been decades in that location, decades longer than the purveyor of uncooked fish." His lip trembled. "If he objects to garlic, he should have opened his so-called restaurant in . . . in . . . "—he searched for a suitable venue—*"in North Dakota!"*

At this rate, Farber calculated, they would be at it until Rochaud's customers hammered on his locked door. Mancuso would fill him in at the end of the day on the highlights of this interrogation and the others he had scheduled. He slipped out of the room to attend to other, less wearisome business. Such was the privilege of rank.

A couple of days later Farber proposed to his wife that they eat dinner out. "How about the Dordogne?" he said tentatively, and when she wrinkled her nose he added, "Consider it part of our ongoing homicide investigation."

"The Department will pick up the tab?"

"Not in this lifetime," Farber replied. But Sylvie had had a long day at her bookstore and she preferred the Dordogne to the chores associated with dining at home. As further inducement, Farber said, "I'll fill you in on our progress so far."

There was no reminder along "Restaurant Row" of an ongoing homicide investigation, or of the recent bodies on the block. Dr. Gerson's sign glowed innocently and all traces of blood were gone from his entry as well as the Dordogne's. This was Friday night and the young dating crowd was out. They stopped to study the menus posted in front of each restaurant, after pointedly steering around the wino at the corner. He appeared to be even scruffier than Jimmy, but Farber still reached reflexively for change as they passed. Sylvie grabbed his arm, hissed, "Don't you dare," and hurried him safely by.

Inside the Dordogne's front door she stopped short and whispered, "Oh my God."

"What?" Bernie said.

She was staring at Madame's sister, entrenched behind the bar as though it was her birthright. "I thought Madame had come back from the dead for the Friday-night rush," Sylvie whispered.

"Close," Farber said, taking in the uncanny resemblance to Madame in the woman's manner and girth, if not in her looks, "but no cigar. Anyway, you can see there's no Friday-night rush."

That was true. The young people had mostly bypassed the Dordogne, and the half-empty room was peopled by the usual geriatric

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crowd. Sylvie had once remarked that what she liked best about coming to this place was, "In here we're the kids."

Clothilde—Mancuso had told Farber her name—flicked an eye at the Farbers and then at the room and murmured, "Any table, monsieur, madame." She hadn't moved a muscle below her jaw line. Pure Madame Rochaud.

They chose a corner at the rear of the gloomy room, where their table was cushioned by a wall of empties. Farber would be able to take in the scene, but their conversation would not be overheard. "We're in luck," he said as a waitress approached. They had drawn the prettier of the two young women—Melissa, according to Mancuso's report. After she took their order and mumbled the obligatory "Good choices," Farber said, "You two waitresses must have your hands full. I see there's no replacement on the floor for Clothilde."

"We're managing," Melissa said through tight lips. "This isn't exactly Le Cirque." Farber now remembered that, yes, she was the prettier of the two but also something of a cold fish. "By the way," she added, "it's not Clothilde anymore. She wants to be called Madame."

"Not Mademoiselle?"

"She's a widow. Her husband was a partner here."

"Really? Is he dead long?"

"Since around the French and Indian Wars. And the reason I'm telling you all this is so you don't have to drag it out of me. I know you're a cop. I saw you here on Sunday with the others." And she turned and made her way to the kitchen.

"Wow," said Sylvie. "Thank you for the rare opportunity to watch you at work."

"My pleasure. Did you notice," Farber said, artfully changing the subject, "how her blouse fell away at the neckline when she leaned over to pick up the menus?"

"I didn't, but then I don't have your trained eye."

"According to a recent study, that maneuver increases tips by twenty percent. Now would you cut the sniping? Because I know you'd like to hear whatever I'm free to tell you about the case." Sylvie nodded meekly and Farber proceeded. "Quigley's eager for a quick close, so we've laid on a sizable task force. They've checked out a fair number of the high-profile neighborhood people Jimmy was likely to recognize on sight, and they've picked up some interesting stuff. Naturally most of it is extraneous to this investigation and really none of our business."

"Is that so?" Sylvie said eagerly. "For instance?"

"The things you learn," he said, shaking his head mournfully. "For instance, who cares that a neighborhood woman who's pregnant isn't pregnant by her husband?"

"The shoemaker's wife!" Sylvie exclaimed. "I knew it!"

Farber's admiration for his wife's prescience was boundless. "No,

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it's not the shoemaker's wife," he lied, "and please, no guessing games. More to the point, the sushi guy—Tada?—has an arrest record. He used to work at a joint in the village that got a rough crowd and he was collared twice for coming at noisy customers with a knife. No convictions. This you'll love. The veggie man next door—Kaplan the Carrot King? He's connected. Lettuce goes in and lettuce goes out. The place may be a small-time money-laundering operation."

Sylvie's jaw hung open in disbelief. "Now you're going to tell me the chiropractor's a quack."

"He may be," Farber said, and when his wife's eyes sprang wide he added with a grin, "but if he is, it's news to us. Now, have you been watching the traffic from the kitchen?"

"Not especially. Why, has Melissa removed her blouse?"

"If you had been watching," Farber said, ignoring the barb, "you would have noticed that Melissa has delivered orders to three tables since we arrived, while Jan, the house ugly duckling, has come out with one."

"Am I supposed to draw some conclusion from that?"

"You would if you knew what I know. According to Jan, by way of Mancuso, Melissa doesn't mind an occasional pat on the tush, or wherever, when she passes the boss in the narrow kitchen. Thus the favored treatment."

"So the kitchen is a regular Peyton Place. So what?"

"It suggests a waning interest by M. Rochaud in his Madame. Or possibly a terminal disconnect from the marriage."

"Or maybe too many hours over a hot stove. *Vive la France.* Bernie, you don't really have much, do you?"

He grimaced. "You've got it," he admitted. "With no physical evidence and no strong motive, we're going nowhere fast. Now where the hell are my *frites?*"

By the time they paid the check and left, with Clothilde's eyes on them right to the door, the restaurant was nearly empty and the street traffic had dwindled. Bernie took his wife's elbow and steered her east. "Let's see how they're doing at Tada," he said.

They were doing well. Admittedly, the place wasn't large, but Farber could see only two unoccupied tables and there wasn't an empty seat at the sushi bar. Behind the counter three sushi chefs bent to their labors. The busiest was Tada himself, his grin fixed, his knife flashing.

Farber had been expecting a call like this, but not at home and certainly not before he had brushed his teeth or poured himself a cup of coffee. He took it in the bedroom. "Where the hell are your people at, Bernie?" Chief of Detectives Quigley demanded. "I don't

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sense any movement on the Rochaud case. You need some extra hands up there?"

"No, Chief. We've got the bases pretty well covered. Every possible scenario, even the most bizarre, is being explored and reexplored. With no forensic evidence it's not manpower we need but a break. All I can tell you is, we're keeping the pressure up."

"You do that, Bernie. Damn it, that Frenchwoman's dead over a week. I'd like to see some progress."

"I hear you," Farber said, and they hung up.

Sylvie was in the doorway, dressed for work. She had an hour's commute ahead of her. "There's coffee made," she said, and studied him. "That was Quigley," she guessed.

"Yeah." Farber wore a pained look.

"He does beat caffeine as a wake-up call."

Bernie hadn't been listening. "You know what I don't like?" he said. "He keeps referring to it as the Rochaud case."

"So? Isn't it?"

"It's also the Jimmy Ryan case. Jimmy Ryan. I knew him twelve years and I didn't learn his last name until he was dead. He's just as dead as that Frenchwoman, and damn it, he ought to have his name on the case."

Sylvie closed the shop as usual at six, took the usual fifty or so minutes to drive home from Irvington, and then spent the next thirty minutes looking for a parking space within walking distance of home. By the time she unlocked the apartment door it was nearly eight and Bernie would be starved. Maybe, in desperation, he was preparing one of his three specialty dishes, none of them memorable but all of them edible. She crossed her fingers as she walked into the kitchen.

Bernie was waiting with takeout Chinese (thank God) and a bottle of white wine, already opened. "It's from New Zealand and a little jetlagged, but not half bad," he said, kissing her on the neck and pouring her a glass.

"You made an arrest," Sylvie said.

"And we'll get a conviction. It's a slam dunk."

"What happened? This morning you didn't have a clue."

"It didn't take clues, it took looking at the case from a new perspective." He sat her down at the table and drew up a chair. "The answer began to sneak up on me while I was on with Quigley this morning, and it hit me full in the face after I hung up. How could I have been so dumb?"

She was waiting for more and when it didn't come she had to prompt him. "Yes . . . ?"

"You still don't get it, do you? To Quigley, to all of us, Madame Rochaud was the victim who counted. She was the one with stand-

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ing in the community, so the murder had to be about her, and that good-for-nothing Jimmy was an unfortunate byproduct of her death. He witnessed Madame's murder, so the killer had to put him away."

"Bernie, you're not telling me anything I don't know."

"How about this? Suppose *Jimmy* was the primary victim and it was Madame, leaving the restaurant, who witnessed *his* murder and had to be put away?"

"Why would anyone want to kill Jimmy?"

"Jimmy had a lock on the most successful panhandling corner on the West Side. His take was substantial, thanks to a loyal following. Plus, he had a safe place to sleep within walking distance."

Sylvie put her glass down. "Are you telling me that the wino who's using the corner now . . . ?" Her voice trailed off on an upward spiral of disbelief.

Farber nodded. "He tried to muscle Jimmy into giving up the spot. When that didn't work, the standoff escalated to the point of no return. Madame Rochaud was unlucky enough to be leaving the restaurant around the time the knife struck home. When it's laid out, it's obvious, isn't it?"

"If it's so obvious, why did it take you so long to figure out?"

"Because the wino was shrewd enough to wait a few days before he claimed the corner. We found the knife strapped to his thigh under his baggy pants. The blade was consistent with the victims' wounds. By the way, the knife was all he had on him except for a few nickels and dimes." With a touch of pride he added, "Nobody ever gave Jimmy Ryan less than a quarter." ●

Good Grief

by Cornelia Snider Yarrington

Grandpa's pending marriage had brought uproar to the house.
Their best-laid plans had not foreseen a busty, showgirl spouse.
It wasn't, you must understand, that they begrudged his fling.
Don't think that they were counting up each silver spoon or ring,
Or that they gave a single thought to his bank account,
Or knew within a dime or two its probable amount.
But, oh, the lamentations when they tripped him down the stairs,
Only to discover his five cats were all his heirs.

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Art by Mark Evans

DESOLATION RIVER

by Raymond Steiber

He'd been retired two years and still in his dreams the heavy steel doors clanged shut behind him and the bolts slid home and he was inside again.

Dietz used to say: "I'm not the only one serving a life sentence. You're serving one, too."

The dream was so vivid this time that to shake it off he had to get out of bed and go out in the three-o'clock-in-the-morning darkness of the porch. Below him the great Desolation River flowed through a silver mist. Its white hissing noise reassured him. He'd never be in that other place again. He'd live the rest of his life in the out-of-doors.

He leaned against the porch railing—a big man in the old-fashioned sense, with a square body and heavy shoulders and big arms. His hair more gray than black anymore, the fur on his chest patched with white.

He thought of Peg and wished that she were here to share this house with him, but the Big C had carried her off. She would've liked the life he'd arranged for himself. Summers here in the cool

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north on his own property. Winters in Arizona where in exchange for looking after things he was given free off-season housing at a closed summer camp. And in both places, long afternoons in waders with a trout rod in his hand, searching the clear pools for the turbo shape of his favorite game fish.

But best of all, no shadow of that place on the hill with its thick walls and searchlights and clanging doors. The place where he'd risen to Chief of Guards and where the sense of despair and seething anger hung so heavily in the air that it was almost like that mist out there. Something you could see with your eyes.

That place had cast its shadow all right. Sometimes it even engulfed their own little home, which wasn't even in sight of it.

He'd cut way back on his smoking, but now he got out his pipe and tamped it full and lit up. The girls were asleep in the room just behind him. Two fourteen-year-olds—his granddaughter Megan and her best friend Anne. In the morning, the boys would come over from the ranch and they'd all go inner-tubing down the fast-running river—something that looked like so much fun that he was almost tempted to join in himself. The boys were too young for the fourteen-year-olds, and he congratulated himelf for arranging that they do things together—no worries about sex rearing its lovely head there. One of them had a handsome older brother of nineteen, and that was all right, too. He was too old for them, but they could moon over him anyway, and what was better for a teenage girl? When they were middle-aged they'd remember that boy with more pleasure and affection than all the ones they later got serious with. Go dreamy-eyed and laugh at their teenage selves as they reminisced about him.

He thought: You were wrong, Dietz. I didn't serve a life sentence after all. And now my time is filled with the simple pleasures of watching my grandkids grow and walking in the free air.

"Desolation River" has all the thrilling story elements Raymond Steiber readers have come to expect: adventure, dramatic and changing settings, moral dilemmas, and plotting reminiscent of the spy genre. Sadly, the North Carolina author, who has been contributing to *EQMM* since 1988, died last year; we have one more of his stories in inventory. Look for it toward the end of the year. †

Dietz crossed the railroad embankment first and there in the woods on the other side was the Honda CRV minivan—just as Ralston had promised it would be. The two younger guys—Morgan

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and Bradelow—followed rapidly behind him.

Dietz was around fifty but looked much older. He was thin to the point of emaciation, and his skin was sallow, and even the cap of white hair on his head looked unhealthy.

But there was intelligence in his eyes and a quick determination in his movements—even though he was scared through. Been scared through, in fact, every minute of the last two hours.

He knelt beside the right front tire. There was a rock wedged against it. He eased the rock out and flipped it over, and it turned out to be a key holder—a look-alike you could leave in your garden in case you locked yourself out of the house.

He unlocked the right-hand door. No light came on as he opened it. That was because the bulb in the ceiling had been removed. Far off, a police siren sounded in the heavy-aired night. The riot would be in full swing by now. By the time the authorities got control of it and realized there were three missing inmates, they'd be far, far away.

There were three complete sets of clothes in the van, one on the passenger seat, another on the driver's seat, and the last in the back. Their positions in the van during the first stage of the drive had already been designated, so they each knew which set was whose.

They undressed in the dark, throwing their prison clothes and shoes into the large paper sack that'd been provided. They'd got pretty dirty crawling through the maintenance tunnel, but there were wet towelettes in a box on the dash and they used them to clean up. The crumpled towelettes went in the sack with the clothes.

Soon they were dressed in workshirts and light jackets and jeans and boots. Morgan and Bradelow were workout fiends—that was how they spent their days in the cells—and they filled out their clothes. Dietz's stuff hung on him as if he'd just returned from a stay in the hospital.

Morgan broke the tip of the incendiary pencil that'd been provided and tossed it into the sack. Then he knotted it up and dumped it in a nearby ditch. Around sunup, when the flames wouldn't stand out against the dark, the time delay would go and the sack and its contents would burn. Which meant that the dogs wouldn't find it and nobody would notice the tire tracks in the dirt and realize they were traveling by motor vehicle now.

They took their places in the Honda. There was a bag of sandwiches on the backseat and two thermoses of coffee. Dietz shoved the little package he'd brought from the prison into the side pocket of his jacket and buttoned it. Then he felt under the seat. The pistol was there, just as Ralston had promised it would be, in its spring-loaded mount. Now if Morgan or Bradelow made trouble,

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he'd be able to handle it. But he didn't think they would. They might be Aryan Brotherhood types, but they knew a good thing when they saw it, and this escape plan was the best.

Morgan switched on the engine.

"Cassette," Dietz reminded from the backseat.

Bradelow shoved the cassette home in the dashboard player. He'd shaved all the hair off his head, even his eyebrows, but the creased fishing hat he now wore hid all that.

The tape hissed for ten or fifteen seconds, then Savage's voice came out of the speakers. He had a British accent—or maybe it was modified Aussie. Ralston had said he'd once been in the SAS, one of the toughest paramilitary outfits on the face of the earth. Now he was a freelance adventurer who, for the right price—and it was a pretty hefty one—arranged capers like this.

"First, don't switch on the headlights. Now make sure the trip odometer is set to zero. That will be very important to you.

"I'm assuming you found the wallets that went with your clothes. Make sure you know the name that's on the ID in yours. That's *your* name now. The credit cards are good, but I don't want you to make any purchases with them for at least two days. Credit cards leave a trail. And afterwards you'll only make *small* purchases.

"You're going to drive straight through to your destination. The only stops you'll make are to switch drivers, at which time you'll also relieve yourselves if you have to. Two men stay awake at all times, the other man sleeps, and every two hours you switch.

"There's a sheet of paper in the glove compartment with some stickum on the back. Take it out now and fix it to the dashboard in a place where the driver can easily refer to it. It's your step-by-step instructions for the route you're going to take. Don't deviate from that route. We've worked it out, and it represents your best chance of getting away.

"At the bottom of the sheet is the number three-nine-seven. If you follow the route correctly and pull off the interstate at the proper exit, at the three hundred and ninety-seventh mile on the trip odometer you'll see a roadside park up ahead on the right. There'll be a stack of gas cans in the bushes just below it. They'll contain enough gas to top off your tank and enable you to reach your destination. There'll be food, too, and further instructions.

"Something to keep your spirits up. Every twenty-five miles further you get away from the prison, it takes another order of magnitude of police to seal you off. At a hundred miles the only way they'll be able to get you is on specific information. The danger point will be the state line. That's where they'll muster their forces. But we've worked that into the route plan, and if you follow it, you should do fine.

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"Now go for it, laddies. And go easy on the gas pedal. And in two days we'll all be meeting at the lake."

Bradelow handed the cassette back to Dietz. At their first stop, two hours hence, he'd stomp it flat and kick the pieces into the weeds.

The Honda CRV reached the road and Morgan wheeled onto it and they were on their way.

A car horn sounded outside and Megan stuffed a last piece of toast in her mouth and headed for the door after her friend Anne.

"See you later, Granpa."

They were so burdened with shoulder bags and fanny packs that you would've thought they were off on an expedition to the Antarctic. But where they were really headed was for a day of horseback riding at the ranch.

Miller stood in the kitchen door and watched them maneuver for the center seat of the ranch pickup truck. That was the seat that put them closest to the driver, who in this case happened to be the dreamy nineteen-year-old, and whoever lost would be browned off the rest of the morning.

Tomorrow morning they'd still be tired from the riding. In the afternoon, he'd drive them in to the new mall in Franklin, an eighty-minute run from here, and they could do what young teenage girls did best—shop and scope out boys. Then he'd take them to dinner—at the Hickory House, he hoped, where he could get a decent steak, but more probably at a pizza place, which is where they'd want to go. Then an early movie and back home again.

On Sunday, Megan's parents would be swinging by to pick them up, and he'd be alone again. But not for long. There was a couple he'd met in Arizona who were coming up for the fishing. They intended to camp out downriver at Desolation Lake.

The park service had put up a sign on the shore there, explaining how the lake had been formed. At the end of the last ice age a natural dam of ice and snow had broken, allowing a huge wall of water to sweep down from above. The racing water had driven boulders the size of houses before it, depositing them on what was now the north shore of the lake, then scooped out the lake itself before rushing away down the valley. Now the north shore was an impassable jumble of rocks and brambles.

The south shore was okay, though, and the lake itself was a deep blue gem eight miles long, which, thanks to underfishing, was teeming with trout. The only way you could get there was by means of the great Desolation River, and even that wasn't straightforward. About five miles above the lake the river forked around a high granite mesa. The north fork—so called because

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that was the direction it initially took—soon spun away into a nightmare of rocks and rapids and falls. Once find yourself in the chute, as it was called, and the only way you came out again was in a body bag.

The east fork had its thrills, too, but they were manageable thrills, and eventually it joined the north fork again and emptied into the eastern end of the lake.

There was a road of sorts, too, but it petered out in the badlands of the north shore. Day hikers used it sometimes, following a rough path through a low-lying area to the lake. But the path was crowded in by blackberry bushes, and you'd better be prepared for an encounter with a bear.

So next week he'd be ferrying the couple and their equipment down to the lake. While he was at it, he decided he'd get a couple of days' fishing in himself, maybe camping out overnight. In the evenings a white mist sometimes came down on the lake and everything would go quiet and you could hear the plop of a trout in the water. Then from far out would come the lonely, spooky call of a loon. That was when he liked to light the campfire, creating a cheery, crackling circle of light. And then with a mixture of butter and wild onions and sliced potatoes begin sizzling the day's catch.

Life had good parts to it, he thought. And in the country round about the great Desolation River you could sometimes grab them up by the armload.

Morgan spotted a tavern up ahead in the gloom and pulled the Honda CRV into a gravel parking lot crowded with pickup trucks and SUVs—the working kind, not the yuppie kind. Dietz shot a look at the trip odometer. It read 383 miles; they'd reset it again when they refueled, which meant they'd come 780 total and barely set foot outside the vehicle.

Morgan said: "We got to find this lake of yours and set you down at the end of it and be on our way."

He and Bradelow were headed for the panhandle of Idaho. They had friends there—fellow skinheads and white nationalists. It was, of course, the first place the authorities would look for them.

No skin off my butt, Dietz thought. We needed each other for a while, and now, in an hour or so, we won't. And good riddance.

Morgan took his pigeon-toed walk into the tavern to make enquiries. He was solid tattoos from the collarbone down—swastikas, SS lightning bolts, the works. But the thorough Mr. Savage had provided him with a roll-top T-shirt and none of it was visible.

Savage thought of everything. He'd even put Ohio plates on the Honda because they were the most ubiquitous in the country and nobody paid any attention to them.

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Bradelow said: "How're your buddies going to pick you up?"

"That's none of your business."

"Well, they got to pick you up someway."

"We agreed at the start that you two wouldn't ask any questions. You get the minivan and can go anywhere you want. Be satisfied with that."

"I'd like to know why they want you so bad. They went to a helluva lot of trouble to spring you."

"And you, too, Bradelow. Don't forget that."

"Me and Morgan was just extra baggage. We was there to run interference for you, see you got through. You got that leg that acts up sometimes. We heard about that."

Dietz had the pistol in his pocket now.

He said: "Bradelow, shut up."

Bradelow whipped his shaven head around.

"You're telling *me* to shut up?"

"Yeah. Right now."

But he didn't draw the pistol. That would precipitate too many uncontrollable events. And besides, Morgan was back and opening the driver's-side door.

He tossed a can of beer to Bradelow.

"See—I brought you a present."

He had one for himself, too. Nothing for Dietz, though. Dietz was the odd man out.

"Did you find out where the track is?" Dietz asked.

"We got to turn on Lowery Hollow Road. It's off of that. It don't go all the way through, though, Dietz."

"I already know that. But it goes far enough."

Twenty minutes later they turned onto it, Morgan taking the rough track way too fast. And ten minutes after that, the deer flashed out of the darkness and Morgan twisted the wheel but hit it anyway, then hit the trees, then rolled the Honda into a ditch.

The headlights stayed on, piercing the darkness. Bradelow crawled out and blood ran down from a gash in his forehead. Then came Morgan, who stood there bent at the waist gripping a busted elbow. The deer was off in the night somewhere still thrashing in agony. Morgan wanted to go kick its head in—not to stop its thrashing but to punish the beast.

Bradelow leaned into the van.

"Dietz! Dietz!"

They had to haul him out. He threw up at the side of the road. then sat down with his back against a tree.

The Honda was a total wreck, its fluids puddling around it like spilled blood. The windshield was starred opaque, and the whole left side was stove in.

Bradelow found one of the cans of beer. He pulled the tab, and it

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foamed over his hand and his chin as he guzzled it. He dabbed at the blood on his head, then went over to Dietz.

"I guess your buddy's going to have to take all three of us now."

"There may not be room," Dietz said wearily.

"Then he goddamn well better make room."

Morgan said: "I saw some lights—off in the woods—about a mile back. A house, maybe."

"A house out here'll have a vehicle with it. We can grab it and be on our way. Maybe we won't need your buddy after all. But you sure as hell need us, Dietz."

He knew that. That was why he hadn't yet pulled the pistol and shot them down. But he wanted to.

He staggered to his feet. Checked his side pocket to make sure that the package was still intact. They set off up the track.

That house Morgan had spotted—Dietz was certain in his mind that it was Tom Miller's place. That was why he'd passed the word to Savage—Desolation Lake for the pickup point. He'd wanted to catch a glimpse of Miller again—see what sort of life he'd made for himself up here. It had seemed very important. Because otherwise how would he be able to judge the quality of his own freedom?

They trudged on through the darkness and he knew he was bringing disaster to Tom Miller. And he was sorry.

The girls were in watching satellite TV. He sat at the kitchen table and tied flies. He had a small mail-order business, but the real reason he did it was for the pleasure of it. And the knowledge, too, that other people caught trout with them and swore by them.

He'd finally heard about the prison break. It had penetrated from a radio playing in the background. No names of the escapees, just the fact that it had happened. As far as his present life was concerned, it might just as well have occurred on the moon.

Hell or Halifax. That was what his dad used to say. Somewhere far away.

All at once there was a shout from the next room.

"Granpa!"

Funnily enough, it was Megan's friend Anne who shouted. Then Megan joined in.

"Granpa! Granpa!"

He rose from the table, but it was already too late because two of them were filling the doorway. One of them had a dirty handkerchief tied over his shaven head, and the other held an arm stiffly against his side. Miller recognized them for what they were immediately. You don't spend half your life locked in a cage full of rattlers and then afterwards begin mistaking them for garter snakes.

"Sit down, old man," the bald one snarled.

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But Miller held his ground.

He said: "You're making a mistake, boy."

Said it with such menace and authority that the one with the bad arm jerked back.

If he'd had his billy club, he'd have been moving by now. Take Bald Head out first, because he was the least scared, then use pressure points to subdue the other one.

He glanced quickly around the kitchen, but there was nothing but the flies he'd been tying. Not even a mop handle or a broom—and he could have used either effectively.

He'd been here before. Hell, he'd had one of them stick a knife in him and managed to wrest it away from him and hold him till more guards arrived.

The luck had been that the other prisoners hadn't joined in. They'd had a grudging respect for him, even a kind of cold affection. He had the reputation of being one of the good guys. A man you could turn to for help if your old lady was jammed up down in the city or your cellmates were abusing you. If you were in long enough, there'd come a time when you needed Tom Miller's help and he'd give it freely.

But he didn't tolerate any breaches of discipline. You couldn't do that when you lived with wild animals.

"Holy crap," the one with the bad arm said, "it's Miller."

"Miller," Bald Head said musingly. Then he pulled a knife.

"You'll need more than that," Miller said.

"I got more than that. There's a man in the next room and he's holding your girls."

Then Miller heard the voice in there, low and soothing, trying to calm them down. And it belonged to Charlie Dietz.

Miller and Dietz had a few minutes alone. Miller and the girls were crowded on the sofa, and Miller had a protective arm around them. Bradelow was in the bathroom next door trying to bandage his bleeding head. And Morgan had gone outside to take a look at Miller's pickup truck.

Dietz had his pistol out. It seemed important that Bradelow and Morgan knew he had it now. It meant he could keep the lid on.

Dietz said: "I didn't mean for this to happen, Tom."

"I don't care about me. But I got these girls, Charlie."

"If the van hadn't gone in a ditch . . ."

"What were you doing on that road, anyway? It just dead-ends, you know."

"I heard there was a path."

"I wouldn't want to take that path in the dark. That area's full of bears and you got no place to run."

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"A float plane's coming tomorrow to pick me up. They wanted a remote spot and I picked this one."

"Because you heard me talking about it. Because this was where you knew I'd retired."

"I didn't mean to cause you harm, Tom. I always regarded you as a friend—you know that. Things just flowed the wrong way on me."

"Then you'd better help me make them flow the other way. I see the way those two've been looking."

He meant at the girls, but he didn't want to say it and alarm them. But they were picking up on it anyway. He could feel a tremor run all the way through Megan's body.

"They wouldn't . . ."

"They would, Charlie. Look at those guys. The reason they ended up where they did is because they don't have any smarts and they don't have any self-control."

Dietz raised his shoulders. "What do you want me to do, Tom?"

"There's a bottle of pain pills in the bathroom cabinet. The prison doctor gave them to me once when I had bad back pain. About six of those each in a couple of bottles of beer ought to do the trick."

"Then what?"

"When I retired, they gave me a couple of leg irons as a joke present. I still got them and they're well oiled and I'll use them on those two. Then I'll send the girls off and take you down the river in the inflatable. That's my deal, Charlie."

Dietz looked at him. "Okay," he said.

"You'll do it?"

"It's a way out. I was looking for a way out."

Bradelow emerged from the bathroom with a big hunk of gauze taped to his head. Already it was turning pink.

He took the pistol while Dietz used the bathroom in his turn. Dietz couldn't get out of giving it to him. How else was Bradelow going to hold Miller down?

Bradelow said: "I think we need to lock you up somewhere, Grandpa."

"You'd better think different then. Because you're not separating me from my girls."

"I could do it all right. What do you think I'm holding in my hand here?"

"You better kill me with the first shot. Because by the time you got to the second I'd have my hands around your throat."

They were huge hands, too, and it slowly penetrated Bradelow's dim brain that he meant every word he said.

"Tough guy, huh? You screws are all alike. By the end, you'll be down on your knees begging."

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"Don't count on it."

Dietz was in the kitchen now. He came back in with a couple of glasses of beer in his hands and offered one to Bradelow. At first he acted as if he didn't want it. Then he snatched it up. His head would be hurting like hell. A cold beer would go good.

Dietz drifted back out to the kitchen. Miller heard the door open and close out there as Morgan returned.

"Why don't you take this one," Dietz said, "and I'll pour another."

Morgan came in the room gulping the second glass.

"What's he got out there?" Bradelow asked.

"An extended-cab Chevy pickup about four years old. Seventy thousand on the odometer."

"I'm not planning on buying it."

"It'll get us where we're going—all right?"

"Then let's quit dorking around. Make up some sandwiches for the road and we'll get out of here."

Dietz came back in.

"I'll take my pistol back," he said.

"No, you won't. It's mine now. Get this guy Savage to give you a new one."

He drank down the beer. He was trying to figure some way of separating Miller from the girls. Maybe he'd get Morgan to club the man with a chunk of wood.

After a while he dropped the glass and didn't know why he'd done it. A class-two painkiller and alcohol—it was the formula for the big crash. And in a few minutes here it came.

Dietz took his pistol back and checked the kitchen.

Morgan was sprawled on the table there, snoring.

Miller got the girls out of the house.

"Get on your bikes and pedal out to the ranch."

"What're you going to be doing, Granpa?"

"Cleaning up after these bastards."

He dragged them out one at a time and leg-ironed them to trees at the edge of the woods.

Dietz was waiting down at the riverbank where the inflatable raft was beached. Together they manhandled it into the water. Miller held it while Dietz climbed in.

"You'll have to get in the bow," he said. "I need to sit in the stern so I can see where we're going."

They pushed off. Dietz had the pistol in his lap, and Miller was aware of it.

"Aren't you going to use the outboard?"

"The current'll take us. I'll use the outboard coming back."

Dietz breathed. "We've been friends a long time, Tom."

"Almost thirty years."

"I was so young when I first went in. Ripe for being turned into

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somebody's punk. But then we were both young. The books you got me sometimes . . ."

"I liked talking to you, Charlie. You weren't a moron like the rest of them. And the books weren't any big deal."

"They were a big deal to me. They made me feel like I was a human being again. And the other things you did for me."

"I did stuff for a lot of people in there. Ones that seemed to need it. You don't keep order just by knocking people around. In a lot of ways, that's the worst plan for keeping order. But look, Charlie, I'd like to know what's going on here."

Dietz was anxious to tell him.

"Remember that big pharmaceutical company that came in and was using inmates to test new drugs? It happened while you were still there."

"Yeah. I never liked that business. You can't say an inmate has a free will in those matters. He'll do anything to get in a program where he's treated better and gets better food."

"They put me to work crunching numbers for them. It was a pretty good deal for me. Then after a while it occurred to me that some rival company might pay to have a look at the data I was processing. Well, you can do anything in prison if you work it the right way, and after thirty years I knew all the ropes. So this way and that I finally managed to get in touch with a rival pharmaceutical company. They sent this guy Ralston to see me. He's supposed to be a lawyer who's taken an interest in my case. So I sign on with him and we get to have all these privileged lawyer-client meetings where I can pass the data to him. The payment for it goes into an outside bank account.

"The data I'm passing gets the home office all excited. And now they want to get a sample of the drug so they can make an end run and begin producing it themselves. It's a Malaysian company that's really owned by a bunch of German businessmen.

"I tell them what my terms are. Not just money, though I want some of that, too, but they've got to spring me as well and set me up in a new country. They don't like it. They don't want any part of it. But the more data I hand them, the more breathless they get, and finally they buy into it. They bring in this guy Maurice Savage. That's not his real name. That's just the name he operates under. And he arranges the thing like a military operation. I don't even know most of the parts of it. How he got the riot started. Or how he arranged passage for us into the maintenance building where the utility tunnels are. All I know is that he pulled it off, and here I am."

Dietz breathed in the night air. He said: "See how it worked out, Tom? We're both free now. We've both served our sentences. And now we can start over again."

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The inflatable hissed through the water.

Miller said: "Charlie. Remember what you did. Why they put you away." Said it deadly serious and so that it could just be heard.

"I know what I did," Dietz said tightly. "I've lived with it thirty years."

"The daughter. The two kids."

"I don't know what happened to me, Tom. To this day I honestly don't know. I . . . I wouldn't do anything like that again."

"I'd bet cash money you wouldn't, Charlie."

"Would you?"

"Yes. But I wonder if I have the right to bet somebody else's flesh and blood. Strangers in this new country they're taking you to."

"I've paid for it, Tom. Don't you think thirty years is enough to pay for it?"

"They would've fried you but for the contrary Supreme Court decisions they had at the time."

"Would you have wanted them to, Tom?"

"That's not for me to say—but knowing you all this time, no, I wouldn't. The trouble is, you've put it in my lap now, and I have to decide."

A big mesa loomed ahead of them in the night. The river parted around it.

"You always had this WASP thing, Tom. Keeping your word. You gave me your word about this."

"The trouble is, I've got a WASP conscience, too. I wish you hadn't put me in this position, Charlie. I wish you would've stayed away from me. Then it would've been somebody else's problem."

They skirted around the right side of the mesa. The speed of the river picked up, and it became noisier.

"And you could live with that? Me getting away? As long as you weren't involved?"

"Yes. But I might be sorry later if this other thing happened."

"I told you. It was an aberration. Bad chemicals. Hell, I don't know. I know I never felt that way again."

"But what if a month from now, six months, a year, you did feel that way again? Then it'd be on me, Charlie."

The raft was flashing through the water now. Bumping. Shipping water.

Dietz began to grow alarmed. "What's going on? Where are you taking me?"

"We're about to enter a series of rapids called the chute. Nobody's ever come out of them alive."

"Tom—what're you doing?"

"I'm going to get out before we get there. It's a slim chance, but

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I'll take it. But I know you can't swim, Charlie. You'll have to stay with the raft."

"I got a pistol."

"You better use it."

"I thought we were friends."

"We are friends. But I can't take a chance on you. And if you thought about it, you'd know you couldn't take a chance, either."

"You gave your word, dammit!"

"No, not exactly. But maybe I'm lying to myself about that."

The chute was coming up fast. Soon they'd be trapped in it.

Miller rolled sideways out of the raft. It almost went over with him, then righted itself. An eddy carried him to one side.

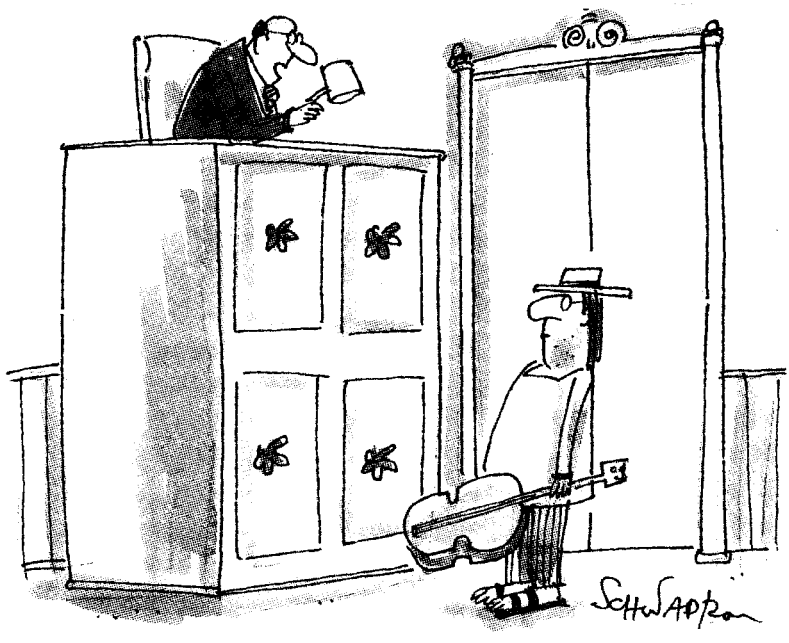
Dietz came up in a crouch—the worst possible position in the unstable raft. He still had the pistol. But it was pointed nowhere.

"Tom!" he called plaintively. "Tom!"

Then the chute swallowed him up.

He'd ended up in a backwater, and now he climbed up through the rocks to the shore. He was wet and cold and it was a long way back to the house and every step of it he'd remember Dietz's last anguished cry.

But he was hard Tom Miller and he'd done what he had to, and any feeling of remorse was as far away as Hell or Halifax. ●



"TEN YEARS IN THE HOKEY POKEY, YOU TURN YOURSELF AROUND, THAT'S WHAT IT'S ALL ABOUT."

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The Problem of the Traveler's Tale

by Edward D. Hoch

This was in the late summer of '41 (Dr. Sam began when their glasses were full), and Annabel and I had been engaged since Easter with our wedding date set for December sixth. It had been a warm and pleasant summer in New England, with news of the widening war still far away. Even when Roosevelt and Churchill met in Newfoundland during the second week in August, most of us viewed the American position as one of support and supply to the Allies rather than actual combat.

"We should get away on vacation," Annabel suggested one Friday evening as we were finishing dinner at Max's Steak House, our favorite local restaurant. "Who knows what next year will bring?"

"You think we'll be in the war?"

She shrugged. "Let's do it now while we can, Sam. Do you ever go canoeing?"

I had to laugh at that. "I've never been much of an outdoorsman, and I haven't been in a canoe since my college days."

"Then it'll be an adventure. If we get dunked, I can blame it on your inexperience."

"I've got a week free, but what about the Ark?" Her veterinary hospital, Annabel's Ark, now attracted critters and their owners from all over the county.

Readers who find that the monthly Edward D. Hoch story in *EQMM* is not enough of the great puzzle-spinner's work may want to look for some upcoming anthologies in which his tales will also appear. Cumberland House will publish *The Psychic Detective,* edited by Otto Penzler, sometime this fall: A Simon Ark story is part of the lineup. From the same publisher, look for the second volume of *Murder Most Divine,* with its two Hoch stories. †

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"Kelly can handle it while I'm gone. She's working out very well."

"All right," I agreed somewhat reluctantly. "Where are we going to do this canoeing?"

"I was thinking of the Connecticut River. There are some nice parks along the way where we could camp and—"

Before she could continue, Sheriff Lens appeared at our table. Under most circumstances I would have been pleased to see him, but just then it seemed more like a needless interruption. "I thought you two might be here for your Friday night dinner," he said, sliding into the booth next to me before I could object. He'd been putting on weight again of late, and I was aware that the edge of the table pressed against his stomach.

"Join us for dessert?" I suggested, mustering up more sincerity than I felt.

"Maybe just some ice cream. Got myself a problem over at the jail."

"What's that, Sheriff?" Annabel asked, and I nudged her foot under the table.

"Fellow stumbled in a few hours ago with the damnedest story you ever heard. Said he'd been hiking in the woods over near Shinn Corners on a route he takes every summer and he came upon an old house that he remembered being empty and deserted. Now it's fixed up nice, newly painted, with flowers in the yard and someone obviously living there. A man and woman were working around back and he decided to stop and chat with them. The woman was friendly enough, but the man went inside after a brief hello and didn't reappear. He had a beard, but there was something about his face that seemed familiar. After the hiker went on his way he kept thinking about it, and by the time he reached here he decided to report it. He thinks the man in the old house is Clifford Fascox."

I recognized the name at once. Fascox was a Chicago swindler who'd worked a Ponzi scheme on thousands of small investors, using money from new investors to pay high interest to the earlier ones, all the while promising huge profits from a mining company in Chile that didn't exist. He sued the first newspaper that tried to expose him for a million dollars, dampening the investigative efforts of others for several months. Finally arrested, he posted bail and promptly disappeared with some five million dollars of his investors' money. He hadn't been seen in two years, and it was assumed he'd fled the country.

"Have you reported this to the state police?" I asked.

"Not yet," the sheriff replied, obviously uneasy. "This hiker's story sounds sort of screwy and I'd like you to hear it before I do anything. He could be a crackpot, or just mistaken."

"So you thought of me."

"If you've got a few minutes I'd like you to see him, tell me if he seems all right to you."

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I sighed and looked at Annabel. "Want to come along?"

"No, thanks! The screwy ones are all yours, unless they have four feet."

I paid the check and told her to take my car home, promising to phone her later. Then I followed Sheriff Lens out to his vehicle and crowded into the passenger seat alongside the shotgun he kept there like an extra gearshift. "Looks like you're prepared for a crime wave, Sheriff," I kidded him.

"It's no joke, Doc. Some folks think the Germans might try to land spies from submarines."

"That's pretty far-fetched," I told him, and it seemed so at the time.

The man who waited at the sheriff's office was tall and lanky, towering over me by some inches. His name was Graham Partridge and his long nervous fingers tapped constantly on the sheriff's desk as he talked. A bulging knapsack rested on the floor by his feet.

"As I told the sheriff, I live in Boston. Every August I go hiking through New England for a week, like an Australian walkabout. My route varies, but I usually try to pass through this area."

"Are you married, Mr. Partridge?" I asked.

"No, I'm a bachelor. Probably couldn't do this if I had a wife." He gave an odd, jerky laugh, and I could see why Sheriff Lens was a bit hesitant about him.

"Tell me what happened."

"I first saw the house just last year, and it was deserted then. Two stories, with boarded-up French windows. It needed work, especially painting. There was a garage in the back and a big willow tree out in front. But this year the house looked lived-in. I could even see a little piano through the French windows."

He kept fidgeting with his fingers as he spoke, and a thought suddenly struck me. "Mr. Partridge, do you play piano?"

"Why, yes. I'm with the Boston Philharmonic."

I gave him a smile. "Couldn't help noticing your finger action."

"I'm always practicing, keeping my fingers nimble."

"Go on with your story."

He described his pleasant surprise at seeing the old house repainted and rejuvenated. When he noticed a middle-aged couple in the back clearing brush, he decided to speak to them. "The woman was younger than the man, maybe in her early forties, and quite attractive. The man was older, with a graying beard and fierce-looking eyes. I told them I was admiring the job they'd done fixing up the old house. The woman was willing to talk, but after a brief hello the man retreated into the house. It was as if he didn't want to be seen. I chatted with her for a few minutes and then went on my way, but I was certain I'd seen him somewhere before.

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As I was approaching Northmont it came to me. Without the beard he could have been Clifford Fascox, the missing swindler."

"How sure are you?"

"Pretty sure. I saw his picture in the papers and on the newsreel."

"But that was two years ago."

Graham Partridge's face screwed up in thought. "I've got a good memory for things like that. I just know it was him."

"What do you think, Doc?" Sheriff Lens asked.

"It's not my decision, Sheriff. But I have a suggestion for a little test. You must have a Wanted poster for Fascox somewhere around the office. Can we lay out five posters with the names covered and see if Mr. Partridge can pick the correct one?"

"It's an idea, Doc. I never thought of that."

Sheriff Lens found the Wanted poster quickly enough. It showed a clean-shaven middle-aged man wanted on federal charges of fraud, using the mails to defraud, and unlawful flight to avoid prosecution. We set up the test, choosing men of about the same age. All were clean-shaven like Fascox. We covered everything but the faces and let him choose. "Number four," he said without hesitation.

"That's him, all right," the sheriff agreed, uncovering the names. "What do you think, Doc?"

"I don't know."

I could see he was reluctant to contact higher authorities until he'd checked it out himself. He scratched his chin and said, "I suppose I could take a run out there in the morning."

"I'll go with you," I suggested. I was sure that was why he'd gotten me over there in the first place.

"That would be fine, Doc. We could make it look like some sort of health inspection. I don't want to do anything until we're sure. You going to be around tomorrow, Mr. Partridge?"

The slender man nodded. "I was planning to stop at a bed-and-breakfast here overnight and then continue my walk in the morning. But I'd be happy to accompany you."

"I don't think that'll be necessary. Try Sleepy Hollow, down the street. Mrs. Maxwell has a nice place there. I'd like you to remain in town at least until noon. If you can draw us a little map of where this house is, Doc and I will drive out in the morning. If there's a problem I might want to talk to you again when we get back."

It was the first time since my engagement to Annabel that Sheriff Lens and I had been alone together, and it was natural that our conversation in his car the next morning would turn to the impending wedding. "I was your best man," I reminded him, "and I'd like you to be mine. I should have asked you sooner, but we went into this without any real plans."

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"I'd be happy to," he told me. "Make you as miserable as the rest of us married fellas."

I knew he was kidding. His own twelve-year marriage had been a near-perfect one, even without the blessing of children. "I only pray I'm as happy as you and Vera."

"Annabel's a great gal, Doc. I knew it the minute she opened the Ark. Who'd ever have thought that an animal hospital would make it in Northmont? Remember that Kasper's Kennel back in 'thirty-five? Lasted less than a year."

"It was only a kennel, though. Folks around here needed a real vet for their pets and livestock. They needed Annabel."

"How's April doing, back working for you again? Does she hear much from her husband?"

"He writes her every few days, but it's not an easy life. He's somewhere at sea but he can't say where. Sometimes she hears nothing for weeks and then a bunch of letters arrive."

"I saw her in church with the boy. He's getting big."

"Sam," I said with a trace of pride. "She named him after me. Almost five now."

"You got that map, Doc? Is this where we turn?"

The map Partridge had drawn was a poor one. In an area without street signs it was next to useless. "I'm not sure. Try the next left."

But the road petered out and we ended at a cow path without encountering any houses. We retraced our route back to the main road and tried the next left, closer to Shinn Corners. After about a half-mile we came upon a house that vaguely fit Partridge's description. It seemed freshly painted and a young woman was mowing the grass.

"Hello, there," Sheriff Lens greeted her as I got out of the car and followed along.

She held up her hand to shield her eyes from the sun. "Howdy."

"I'm Sheriff Lens and this here's Dr. Hawthorne. We're doing a health survey. You lived here long?"

"Since April."

"And your name is—?"

"Jennifer Logan." She turned away from the sun and dropped her hand, revealing the pleasant face of a dark-haired woman in her late twenties.

"Anyone else live here with you?"

"Only my companion, Jackie."

"Is Jackie home now?"

"Sure. We're always together."

"Could we speak with him?"

A slow smile played about her lips as she turned and called into the house. "Jackie, could you come out here for a minute?"

A tall, slender woman appeared in the doorway. "What is it, Toots?"

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"They're doing a health survey."

She took the porch steps two at a time and stuck out her hand to me. "I'm Jackie O'Neill. Do we look healthy enough to pass?"

Sheriff Lens seemed confused. "We understood there was a gentleman living in the house."

"Nobody here but us chickens, eh, Toots?"

"That's right," Jennifer Logan agreed.

"This would be a bearded man, somewhat older than you." He produced the mug shot of Fascox and showed it to them with the name folded back out of view.

"Never saw him before," Jackie announced, "with or without the beard."

"Are there any other renovated houses around?" I asked.

"We keep pretty much to ourselves," Jennifer answered.

"Well, thanks for your help," the sheriff said. "Come on, Doc." Back in the car, he asked, "What do you make of those two?"

I shrugged. "I guess they're just what they seem. Wanted criminals aren't the only ones who might prefer to live by themselves."

We tried two more roads but by that time we were into Shinn Corners. "We'd best turn back and get Partridge to come out here with us," he decided.

The Boston traveler was just donning his backpack at Mrs. Maxwell's bed-and-breakfast when we drove up. "Find the house?" he asked when he saw us.

"Not a chance with your map," the sheriff informed him. "You'd better come with us, show us the way."

"If you need me," he readily agreed.

We retraced the same route, guided by Partridge's map, but he quickly agreed it was in error. "I missed this road to the right," he admitted.

"You said it was to the left."

"I got turned around. I've never been good at directions. Try this one."

We came upon a man I recognized, a patient of mine named Peter Harrison, spreading crushed stones on his driveway. "How's it going, Peter?" I called out to him.

"Fine, Doc. Aren't you a little bit out of your neighborhood?"

"We're looking for a house, two-story, recently remodeled and repainted, with a big willow tree in the front yard. Sound familiar?"

Peter took off his cap and wiped some sweat from his brow. He'd never been a fast mover. "You probably want the old Stover place. Fellow from the city bought it about a year ago."

"Do you know his name?"

"Common name. Collins, I think. A woman named Mavis lives

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there, too. I suppose it's his wife. We don't see much of them. Stay right on this road and you'll come to the house."

It seemed like a solid lead at last, and soon Partridge pointed out the hiking trail he'd taken. Around the next curve we came upon the house as he'd described it, half hidden by the giant weeping willow. "This must be the place," Sheriff Lens said.

"Yes," our backseat passenger agreed. "I recognize it now."

The place seemed closed and deserted as we left the car and walked toward it. Sheriff Lens went up on the porch and peered through the curtained French doors that opened into the living room. "Pretty fancy place for Shinn Corners," he remarked. "Somebody put a peck of money into this."

"See anything?" I asked.

"Looks like nobody's—" He stopped in mid sentence. "Doc, come look in here!"

I peered through the lace curtains on the other side of the glass. It was difficult to make out anything clearly, but I saw what looked like a body stretched out on the carpet, its head and shoulders hidden from view around a corner. Quickly I tried the doors but they were all locked. "Let's see if we can find an open one," I told the sheriff.

In addition to the French doors, there were the front and back doors, both firmly locked, and eleven windows, likewise locked. After we'd circled the house, Sheriff Lens decided to break one of the panes of glass in the French doors. "We've got to get in there, Doc."

"Of course we do! He might still be alive."

The sheriff tapped the pane with the butt of his revolver and the glass shattered. He reached in to pull the bolt. "This guy was taking no chances," he observed. "Extra bolts on these French doors." He turned to Partridge. "You stay out here."

"Bolts on the other doors too, I'll wager." By then I knew it was going to be a locked-house killing. I'd been through these things too many times before.

The bearded man was dead when I reached him, and he would have been just as dead if we'd found him five minutes earlier. His head was almost touching an upright piano and bench that stood in an alcove. The fatal bullet had entered through the right temple, leaving a clean, clear hole that had bled just a little. A small automatic pistol, .32 caliber, was clutched in his right hand.

"Suicide, huh, Doc?"

I merely grunted as he continued to search the ground floor. He was in the kitchen when he suddenly called to me. "Come quick, we got another one!"

It was a woman this time, sprawled on the kitchen floor. She'd been shot at least twice, apparently with the same weapon, and like the bearded man she'd probably died instantly. "We'd better

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get Partridge in here to identify them," I suggested.

The sheriff went to the door and called him in. "Are these the people you saw yesterday?"

The slender man was repelled by the sight of the bodies. "My God, what happened?"

"Looks like murder and suicide. Are these the people?"

"Yes," he said quietly.

"You're sure?"

"It's them."

"And you think the bearded man is Clifford Fascox?"

"I'm sure of it."

"The woman is the one you talked with in the yard yesterday?"

"Yes, it's her."

Sheriff Lens nodded. "All right. Just stay in here for a moment."

Partridge wandered into the alcove and stared at the piano. He tapped his fingers over the keys as he had on the edge of the sheriff's desk, frowning when he hit one out of tune. "This is a crime scene," Lens reminded him sharply. "Don't touch anything." Then, "What do you think, Doc?"

"You'd better phone and get some men out here. I'm going to check the windows on the second floor."

"You think one of them might be open?"

"I'm sure they're all locked. He wanted us to be certain it was a murder-suicide."

"Fascox?"

"Yes. Or whoever killed them."

While the sheriff phoned his office and the state police, I made a tour of the second floor. The windows were all firmly locked, and the door to an upstairs porch was both locked and bolted, like the downstairs doors. The double bed in the main sleeping room was unmade. When I went back downstairs the sheriff was on the phone to the state police while Clifford Partridge stood nervously in the center of the room, afraid to touch anything.

I knelt to examine the bolts on the French doors, well aware that these could be sprung open if one of the doors was not secured at its base and top. The top bolt into the door frame was open, but the bottom bolt into the floor was firmly in place. Despite my pushing on it, the door did not move. Next I moved to the fireplace chimney, but I saw at once that it was too narrow for even an elfish Santa Claus to have used. And holding a match to the soot-lined walls, I could see it was undisturbed.

"Do I have to stay in here with these bodies?" Partridge asked.

"Go outside," Sheriff Lens told him. "The state police will want to question you."

There was a bill from the electric company on a desk, addressed

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to a Mavis Collins, but I saw nothing visible with the bearded man's name on it. Within fifteen minutes the first car arrived with Corporal Williams of the criminal investigation division. We told him what had happened and he assigned someone to take the dead man's fingerprints. "We'll find out soon enough if it's Fascox."

Sheriff Lens explained about Clifford Partridge and how he'd recognized the man during his walkabout. "I suppose if Fascox thought he'd been discovered he might have decided to kill himself and take his wife with him, if it was his wife."

Corporal Williams nodded. "I'd better get a statement from this Partridge fellow."

"That's him outside by the willow."

When we were alone, I spoke quietly to the sheriff. "I don't think he killed himself."

"Why not?"

"Look at his wound again. Clean, no powder burns."

"Damn! I shoulda noticed that!"

"The woman couldn't have killed him, shot herself twice, and then walked into the kitchen to die. For one thing, there'd have been a trail of blood. And for another, that second bullet would have finished her off."

"But you told me the place was locked up tight, from the inside. Is this another one of your impossible crimes, Doc?"

"I'm afraid so, Sheriff."

Corporal Williams came back inside with Partridge. "Have you checked that garage out back?" he asked.

"Just going to do it now," Sheriff Lens told him. I followed along.

The garage had been painted along with the house, but unlike the house the door was unlocked and actually ajar. Inside we found barrels of junk, broken glass and empty paint cans, along with a hammer and other tools. A late-model Cadillac sat side by side with an old turn-of-the-century surrey. The cloth top of the carriage had been badly damaged, its clear isinglass sides cut apart as if by vandals. I wondered how many decades ago the damage had been done. "The old and the new," Sheriff Lens muttered. "This carriage must have been here when they bought the place."

I searched around a bit, looking for something that might help. There was a ladder capable of reaching the second-story windows, but I'd already established that they were all locked and bolted from the inside. "There's nothing to show the killer was ever in here," I decided. "If it was a vagrant, he probably would have stolen the car."

"We'd better wait for that fingerprint check," the sheriff said.

I phoned April in the morning and told her I'd be over with Sheriff Lens. Annabel listened to my call from the kitchen and said simply, "Sam."

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"I know, we're going canoeing next week."

"I certainly hope so."

"I just want to be there when the state police phone in with the fingerprint report."

"Where's this fellow Partridge who started it all?"

"Still at Mrs. Maxwell's place. The sheriff wants him here until we get the report."

"If the dead man is Clifford Fascox it's going to be big news all over the country. He swindled a lot of people."

"His murder's going to be big news, too."

She sighed and looked at me. "You're never going to stop, are you?

"I have a knack for it, Annabel. It's what I do."

When I walked into the sheriff's office later that morning I had a surprise. Jackie O'Neill, the lanky young woman we'd met the previous day, was standing just inside the door. "You're Dr. Hawthorne," she said, making it sound like an accusation.

"That's right."

"Jennifer and I heard about the killings at the old Stover place. I want to know if there's some sort of homicidal maniac on the prowl up there."

Sheriff Lens was exasperated. "I tried to tell her we're not even sure it was a double murder, Doc. It might have been a murder-suicide."

"That's not what I hear," the woman told us. "We came to Shinn Corners to get away from crime in the city. We had a couple of bad experiences in Boston and we don't want them repeated here."

"I assure you this was no maniac," I said. "The killer went about it in a most deliberate manner."

The sheriff joined in. "And I can tell you, Miss O'Neill, that I've assigned an extra deputy to patrol the roads in your area. You and your friend are perfectly safe."

"We'd better be." She turned and slammed out the door, still angry, just as Corporal Williams of the state police was coming in.

"What's her problem?" he asked.

Sheriff Lens shook his head. "She and her girlfriend feel the law isn't protecting them enough. What about the fingerprints?"

"It's Clifford Fascox, all right. He was a federal fugitive, so the FBI is in on it now. They have two agents driving down from Boston this afternoon."

I could see the sheriff wasn't too pleased to hear that. "Got any more good news for me?"

"The doorknobs, bolts, and window latches had all been wiped clean of fingerprints."

"Not the sort of thing a would-be suicide would bother doing," I observed.

"While we were checking, we contacted the Boston police about

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your traveler, Mr. Partridge."

"Oh?"

"Arrested back in 'thirty-nine for drunken driving when he hit a parked car. He plays with the Philharmonic and since there were no injuries he got off with six months' probation. He claimed he got drunk after a financial setback and swore he'd never drink again. His record's been clean since then."

Sheriff Lens looked at me. "What do you think, Doc?"

"About Partridge? If he killed them and was clever enough to get out of that locked house, he certainly wouldn't come running to you to report on Fascox's whereabouts."

"I suppose not."

"Still—"

"What?"

"I'm thinking."

"You fellows do all the thinking you want," the trooper said. "The FBI will be here around two."

They were right on time. Special Agent Frank Dunsmore was sandy-haired and clean-cut, with a neat blue suit and tie. He did all the talking, with just a hint of a Boston accent. "Gentlemen, the fingerprints confirm that the dead man is Clifford Fascox, a federal fugitive under indictment on several counts of fraud and using the mails to defraud. The woman who died with him is believed to be Rose Secondo, who was living with him when he jumped bail in Chicago and disappeared two years ago. If I understand correctly, there were no powder burns on either of their wounds, even though all the doors and windows were locked and bolted from the inside."

"That's correct," the sheriff told him.

"If they were murdered by a third person, can you explain how he or she exited the house? The chimney—"

"We examined it," I told him. "Not possible."

"The basement?"

"No way out."

He sighed, "Then maybe it was suicide."

"No powder burns," I reminded him.

He frowned at me. "Just who are you, anyway?"

Sheriff Lens answered for me. "Dr. Hawthorne has given me invaluable aid in cases of this sort. I don't know where I'd be without him."

"All right, Dr. Hawthorne, do you have any idea about this one?"

"Part of an idea," I admitted. "I have a problem with our traveler's tale."

"You mean Graham Partridge?"

"Yes. He lied in his original story. He said he could see a piano

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through the French windows, but the piano stands around a corner in an alcove. It's not visible through the windows."

"Does that make him a double murderer?" the FBI man asked.

"It could, if we figured out how he did it."

"And why," the sheriff added. "What would his motive have been?"

"I have an idea about that, too. You told me earlier that he was arrested in 'thirty-nine for drunken driving. He'd had a financial setback that drove him to drink. Two years ago was when the Fascox swindle came to light."

"Let's get him in here again."

"If he hasn't left town already," I said.

As it turned out, Graham Partridge had left town. One of the sheriff's deputies picked him up on the highway, striding along with his knapsack. When we saw him an hour later at the county lockup, he was highly indignant. "I'm a respected citizen back in Boston. You're treating me like a common criminal!"

"I asked you to remain at Mrs. Maxwell's bed-and-breakfast," Sheriff Lens reminded him.

He glowered at us. "Only until you had confirmation that it was Fascox's body. I phoned your deputy this morning and he said the identification had been made. I assumed I was free to go."

"You weren't free to go until I said so."

"Sorry."

Special Agent Dunsmore and his assistant had gone out to visit the crime scene, so the sheriff and I were alone with Partridge. "You may be a respected citizen in Boston," I told him, "but you have an arrest record there for drunken driving."

"I received probation for that. It was a bad period of my life, but it's over now."

"You told police that financial setbacks drove you to drink. You were one of Fascox's victims, weren't you? That was how you were able to recognize him so quickly, even with the beard."

"I won't lie about it. He stole my life's savings. I would have known that face anywhere."

"How did you know he was hiding out here?"

"I didn't! I swear to you! I walked into that yard and there he was staring at me. Of course, my face meant nothing to him. I was simply one out of thousands that he'd swindled. But I knew him right away."

"And you killed him," I said. "You probably carried that little pistol in your knapsack for protection during your hiking. You followed him into the house and—"

"I was never in the house."

"You said you saw the piano. You had to be inside to see it."

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"If I killed them, why would I come in here to report it? Why wouldn't I just keep on going? No one else saw me there."

It was a good question. And at the moment I didn't have an answer for it, any more than I had an answer for how he got out of the house after he killed them. But in his eyes I saw something, perhaps a glimmer of triumph, that told me I was looking into the eyes of a murderer.

"We're going out there again," I told the sheriff after he agreed to hold Partridge in a cell overnight as a material witness. "If we don't find anything this time, you'll have to let him go."

"Damn right I will! He's already threatening to sue for false arrest. The judge will turn him loose in the morning if I don't."

"He did it!" I insisted. "I could see it in his eyes."

"We need more than that."

"I know we do."

When we pulled up at the house where Clifford Fascox and Rose Secondo had died, I was dismayed to see that the FBI agents were still on the premises. As soon as Dunsmore saw us he walked over to the car. "Back again?"

"I'm holding Partridge overnight as a material witness," the sheriff told him. "Find anything?"

"Nothing."

As we stood there I noticed how the late afternoon sun was hitting the panes of glass in the French doors. "Sheriff, look at that."

"What are you seein', Doc?"

"The sun's reflection is just a bit different in that bottom pane. Come on!"

They followed along behind me as I hurried up to the doors. My fingers reached out and touched the pane. "What is it?"

"Not glass," I assured them. "Remember that broken glass we saw in the rubbish barrel in the garage, Sheriff? That was from this window. The killer broke it so he could reach through and close the floor bolt on this door, after he pulled the doors closed. He replaced the glass with a piece of clear isinglass that he cut from that old carriage in the garage. It wouldn't stand up to close inspection, and he had to nail the corners to hold it taut in the frame, but with those lace curtains covering it on the inside he almost got away with it."

"Sure," Sheriff Lens agreed. "Two bodies in that locked house, the murder weapon left in Fascox's hand. If only Partridge had remembered about the powder burns we might have taken it for a murder-suicide."

"It was a spur-of-the-moment killing," I surmised. "He came upon the house just as he said, and immediately recognized Fascox as the man who had swindled him and thousands of others. They

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must have shown him the garage and then the inside where he saw the piano. He took out the pistol he carried in his knapsack and shot them both. He remembered the isinglass windows on the carriage and cut out a piece the right size to fit the window frame. Then he locked and bolted everything from inside and left the gun in Fascox's hand. He carefully broke the bottom pane of the French doors, picked up the pieces, and disposed of them in the trash barrel. He closed the French doors and then reached through the opening to push that final bolt into its floor hole. The isinglass pane went into the door, not a perfect fit but good enough. He used the hammer from the garage and a few nails to hold it in place."

"But why did he report Fascox's sighting to me?" Sheriff Lens wondered.

"He probably never thought about the missing powder burns, but about the time he reached Northmont he remembered something else. It was a fatal error that would have convicted him in a minute. He couldn't chance going all the way back to correct it, so he came to you with his tale. He purposely drew us a misleading map after you said we didn't need him to accompany us. His whole purpose in telling that tale was to get back into this house with you, to cover up that fatal piece of evidence."

"What evidence are you talking about?" Dunsmore wanted to know. "Stop playing games with us."

"You saw how his fingers were in your office, Sheriff. He was constantly tapping them on your desk and I guessed correctly that he was a piano player. When he entered Fascox's house and saw that piano, he wouldn't have been able to resist playing a few notes."

"He did that yesterday with us!" Sheriff Lens remembered. "I had to warn him not to touch anything."

"Exactly! He played those few notes yesterday so there'd be a reason for his fingerprints on the piano keys. You see, he forgot to wipe them off when he was there the first time. With his prints on file from that driving arrest, he knew there was no way out."

"Let's go get a confession, Doc."

"That shouldn't be difficult," I said. "He's no hardened criminal. He killed two people simply because chance brought them together."

I was right. Graham Partridge made a full confession as soon as I mentioned the fingerprints on the piano keys and the isinglass in the window. "You people are pretty good for a small town like this," he remarked ruefully as he signed the confession. "But I'm still not sorry about what happened. It's just that I'll miss my piano." ●

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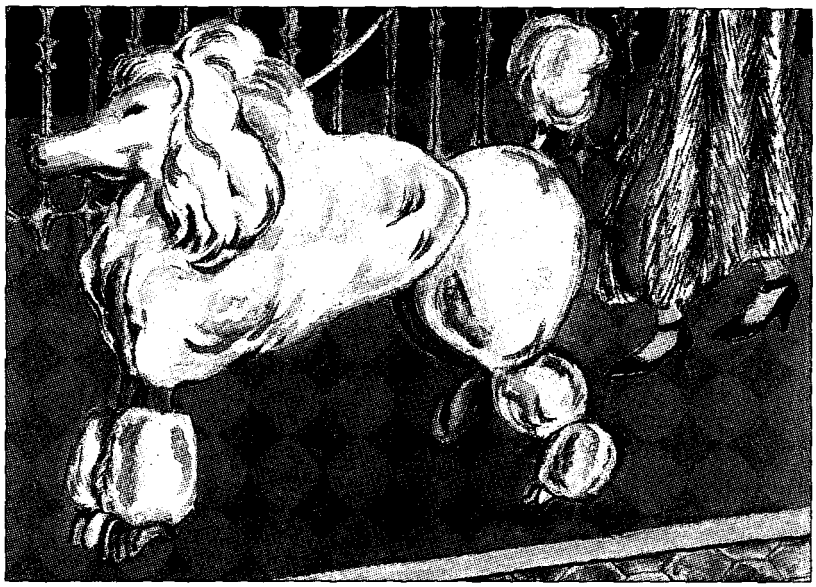

Art by June Levine

DOGNAPPED

by Robert Barnard

Pedigrees! Don't you just hate them?

I don't mean the family trees handed out by breeders and kennel clubs: "Fifi Tinkerbell, out of Rex Tremendous and Betty Buttercup"—making perfectly ordinary dogs sound like the unfortunate children of film stars or pop stars.

No, I mean the animals themselves. You can say it's not their fault, but a dog can protest, can bring his "owner" into line and train him. Look at me and Svein, for example. I've got him well under control, and he's much happier for it. Whereas these pedigrees lead a life of pampered slavery: pricked, pomaded, brushed, and combed nearly out of their lives and sanity, and paraded before mental defectives with ribbons and topknots in their fur and with a ridiculous, high-stepping gait that suggests they were trained at the Vienna Riding School.

I am thinking particularly of poodles. I don't often think of poodles, but in this instance I am. The Lord Fondlepaws. In English. I saw him first with his owner, a heavily made-up, fur-coated lady of about forty on a good day. They were emerging from a classy set

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of flats just round the corner from us in Minde, a suburb of Bergen, in Norway. The owner looked as if five minutes' walking was about all she was good for, and the Lord Fondlepaws was high-stepping it in the ridiculous manner I have described.

"You needn't even sniff," said Svein, unkindly. "He's way out of your class."

Well, thank Dog for that! As the great poet-dog Gynt said many generations ago: "Stout hearts are more than pedigrees, and sturdy lungs than inbred blood." That hits the nail on the head. If anyone ever asks Svein about my lineage—strangely enough, no one ever does—I hope he will say that I was sired by The Great Unknown. And all the better for it, I will add silently.

No matter what type of mystery he is writing, Robert Barnard always manages to put a new spin on it. He's one of the foremost contemporary writers of the classical style of detective story, but the mordant humor that infuses his whodunits makes them quite different from the typical Golden Age mystery. He also writes offbeat historicals—and now he gives us Svein and Loyd, a detective team in which a man becomes a sort of Watson to his dog. ¶

I never felt that acquaintance with The Lord Fondlepaws was inevitable, and would have slunk round any number of corners to avoid it, but Fate that spring had it in for me. We were on a late-night, last-chance-to-empty-the-bladder walk and going past the entrance to his block of flats when out he came with his mistress—she looking, at that time of night, the worse for wear, and for drink.

"Oh hel*lo,*" she said in English. "Let the two darlings get acquainted."

Fondlepaws sniffed, raised a languid back leg, and headed off in one direction. I sniffed, cocked, cancelled him out, and headed off in the other. He was easily tired of the common herd, and I was registering that a member of the Upper Breed had moved into my territory, and I was not impressed.

"I was hoping I was going to bump into you," said the woman. I pricked up my ears. No woman, but *none,* not even a forty-something paint and powder plastered one-time dolly bird like this one ever wanted to bump into Svein for himself alone.

"Oh?" said Svein fascinatedly.

"People tell me you're a detective. In fact, they say that you and your dog are quite local celebrities."

"Oh, I don't know about that," said Svein, who really knew how to make himself interesting. "Do you have a problem?"

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"Well, not *yet,*" she said, with a simper and a batting of the eyelashes. "I've just got a premonition—nose in the air, you know how it is—that I'm going to have one before long. It's that useless hunk of Norwegian goat's cheese that I married."

Tact was obviously her middle name. It occurred to both of us that we didn't know her name yet.

"And your husband's name is . . . ?"

"Torbjørn Sæthre."

"And you are?"

"Vivienne—Sæthre at the moment, but not for long. I'll be reverting to my maiden name, Harcourt, and heading off back to the British Isles as soon as all the legal stuff is sorted out. God! will I be glad to leave this dump! I thought *we* were rainy!"

Svein, like all Norwegians, dislikes hearing his country, and particularly his hometown, denigrated. I feel a bit like that myself. "Home is where the food bowl is," said the homely philosopher-dog Beauty, and it's true.

"People say Bergen looks its best in the rain," Svein said.

"Norwegians do. They would, wouldn't they? That's how ninety percent of the tourists see it."

"Getting back to your husband—"

"Oh, him. Yes, well, that's where the threat comes from. I'm not saying he's besotted by Lord Fondlepaws. In fact, he's hardly fond of him at *all*—not in the way *I* love the darlingest darling in all the world! But of course he's *des*perate to get even with me. I mean, leaving him, and suing him for half his worldly goods—though I'm *not* a gold digger, and a quarter would do at a pinch. And the really aggravating thing for Torbjørn is that he can't get a thing on me. I've been as pure as the driven snow!"

Pure as the driven slush, more like, I thought. Cunning, secretive, with an eye on the main chance, her misdeeds would all take place in hired hotel rooms on Bryggen or Kong Oscars gate.

"So what you're afraid of is—?" began Svein.

"That he'll make a surprise *swoop* and take my precious from me! That's what we're afraid of, aren't we, my wonderfulest cutiepie? And we don't want to go with that nasty man, do we, my precious! He doesn't want to be *seized* by any brutal Viking invader!"

Svein cleared his throat.

"To get down to practicalities, does your husband have access to your flat?"

"Well, he hasn't got a *key,* of course. I'm not so green as to give him one. But there are ways, aren't there? Skeleton keys, battering down doors, using sneak thieves to gain access."

"Do you get any feeling he's watching your movements?"

I felt sure she hadn't had any such idea, but now she seized on it.

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"Yes, I do! As you say, it's a feeling! That someone is watching me, following me. So creepy!"

"Well, I realize you're not hiring me," said Svein, "but we will keep an eye on the flat, and the streets around, won't we, Loyd, old boy? Just to be on the safe side."

So she'd got herself a private detective (and dog) without paying a penny for it. What it is to have long eyelashes! In the walks on succeeding days and particularly nights we did what Svein promised. "Nothing out-of-the-way on tonight," Svein would say. And I would look up intelligently and wag my tail. Of course there was nothing out-of-the-way going on. Because it was all in the mind—if that bundle of sponge and soggy tissue paper that she had in her head could be dignified with the name mind—of that ageing bimbo.

So I was surprised when Svein got a telephone call from her. I sat close by Svein's legs to hear what she was saying.

"Svein? May I call you that? *Could* you come? I'm at my wits' ends! It's happened! Lovely Fondlepaws has been *taken!* Could you come round, please—and lovely Loyd, too, of course."

Well, of course Svein said he'd be right over. This was much more interesting than the bank surveillance jobs that had gained us our reputation. Svein didn't get many languishing glances cast in his direction in the usual course of duty, and if Vivienne expected much out of him in the romantic line, then hope was definitely triumphing over realism. Anyway, he certainly wasn't bursting out of his trousers, but there was a decided spring in his step as he and "lovely Loyd" (silly bitch) stood outside number fifteen, Camilla Collets gate, identified themselves after ringing, and then went up to flat seventeen.

The door of the flat was open, and it was clear, or apparently so, that someone had broken in. Vivienne was standing in the living room, plushly furnished with not a trace of clean Scandinavian lines, and looking as if she would normally have clutched Lord Fondlepaws in her arms to make a striking picture. Eventually she picked up one of the many cushions and hugged it to her, hoping to make a pathetic point about her loss.

"What do you think?" she asked as Svein examined the door.

"You've been broken into," said Svein.

"Well, I know that! Does anything strike you?"

"These flats have got lousy security. The door is flimsy, to say the least."

"But there's the front door, and the answering system."

"Anyone can wait until someone goes in or out. You're paying for a lot in these places, but you're getting nothing in the way of security."

"Well, you know what Norway is like—hardly any crime worth calling crime."

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It seemed an odd reason to sneer, but then, Svein and I could do with a bit more in the way of breaking and entering.

"Where was he taken from?"

"My bedroom." Flutter, flutter went the lashes, as if we hadn't known she had such a thing. "My sweetipooch *loves* my bed, always goes there for choice if I'm out." She led the way through. "And—see—he had to be *seized,* because he didn't want to go with that *awful* man!"

There was certainly a degree of disorder. It had been raining outside for the last forty-eight hours, and there were muddy footprints on the carpet, chairs, even smears on the bedspread. I went around sniffing for form's sake, but really taking in Vivienne's nightgown and underclothes. Sometimes it's difficult to remember what a woman is like.

Svein took out his camera and photographed the best of the shoe marks, and then he gave her a card from his wallet.

"Ring this chap. He'll come and fix the door. Tell him to make it as safe as he possibly can."

"Oh, Svein, you are *kind!*" fluttered Vivienne, as if she were quite incapable of going to the Yellow Pages.

"You stay here and wait for him, and Loyd and I will go round and see if anyone heard anything."

So we first went up and down the first-floor corridor where Vivienne Sæthre lived. Not much joy there. Few people were in, and those that were were all housewives and househusbands, slaving away over hot labour-saving appliances. No, they'd seen nothing of a break-in—how could they, with no windows out on the corridor? Had they heard anything, then? No, they'd had the television/radio/CD player on, and they minded their own business. Which flat was it? they asked, contradicting themselves. Oh, the English lady (they said the word *dame*—dah-mer—in doom-laden tones). Oh no, they'd had nothing to do with *her.* Good English is a status symbol with Norwegians of a certain age, with the result that many go out of their way not to speak it.

Right—down to the ground floor. Results pretty much the same, though fewer had heard of the English dah-mer, and Svein had to mention the lady with the poodle to arouse any flicker of lack-of-interest. Towards the end of our quest, however, we came to the door of Vidar Sunderberg, skattekonsultent, a sporty-looking type who looked good for a five-mile walk any hour of the day. Svein mentioned Vivienne and he nodded.

"That's the English woman, isn't it? With the dog?"

"That's right."

"She shouldn't have that dog in these flats, by rights."

"Really?"

"No. You've no idea how long it took me to get permission to

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have one." He opened the door to the living room and let out a medium-sized dog of indeterminate parentage. We looked at each other. Not ill-disposed. If we'd been out on Fløyen we'd probably have had a bit of a romp. "These flats are investment-company ones. You buy a share, and there's a committee runs them and adjudicates on any matters of potential dispute. It took me nearly a year to get permission to own Osvald. They prefer pedigrees, they worry about size. Size isn't that easy to predict when you've got a cross-breed puppy. Sheer bloody red tape for the sake of it."

"But Fru Sæthre got permission quicker, did she? I suppose you don't get massive poodles."

"Hmm. I'd bet she used either sex, or money, or charm."

"I'd back sex," said Svein.

"You haven't seen the committee. I'd back charm. You can get anything if you manage a bit of gentle warming to aged loins. Charm comes a lot cheaper than money, and she hasn't got much of that."

"Nice man," said Svein, as we went to knock on the last of the doors, with no result. Not like Svein to be well-disposed to anyone who has anything to do with tax. So far as I can judge, tax people are akin to those scavenging dogs who make it their business to go around and pick up all the bits and pieces of bones left by more happy-go-lucky dogs.

The next thing to do was call on the estranged husband. When we went back to the first floor the door was being fixed. Vivienne was oozing charm, because Svein had picked on the best-looking of the jobbing builders whose names he gave to clients who had been broken into. No remarks about hunks of Norwegian goats' cheese this time. I thought this was not very far from pimping (something inconceivable in the world of dogs), but there was no way I could convey my disapproval to Svein, so I kept quiet about it. A lot of the good relationship between man and dog relies on the man's total inability to read a dog's body language. "What a man can't understand is legion," said the philosopher-dog Heidegger (fl. Trondheim 1920s), "and best left that way."

Vivienne's ex lived on Sotra. I would have liked to take the ferry over, being very partial to sea air and a bit of a bark at the wash in our wake (I still like a bit of fun, which is more than you can say for Svein). But no, it was the bridge, with me curled up on the backseat with my eyes closed to avoid vertigo. When we got to the Sæthre residence it was clear that was exactly what it was: an old white-wood farmhouse, centre of what had once been a smallish farm, since built over in a piecemeal kind of way. There was an estate agent's sign by the gate, windows and front door were open, and a middle-aged man was going in and out with stuff to pile in an old van.

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"Excuse me," said Svein. "Are you Torbjørn Sæthre?"

"Yes." (Very cagily said.)

"I've come about a dog."

Sæthre gestured towards the property.

"Whistle for him. The whole place is open to view."

Svein thought about this for a while.

"Mind if I look around?" he asked.

And that's what we did, but of course there was no sign of the Lord Fondlepaws shut away anywhere. Around us Sæthre continued taking bits of furniture and vases, books and electrical equipment out to his van.

"Moving?" asked Svein when we were out on the road again.

"Letting it to a visiting Fulbright professor. People tell me if they've got children it's the equivalent of calling in the demolition men. This place is the only thing she hasn't got her hands on."

"She?"

"That bitch Vivienne. I presume you're from her."

"She called me when her dog was kidnapped."

"Kidnapped? Don't make me laugh! What would I want with a dog? Particularly a dog like that. Take it skiing and it'd demand to have its paws wiped every two minutes."

"I thought you might have taken it as some kind of revenge—Fru Sæthre loves it so much."

"Oh, she's got you fooled, hasn't she? Get this: Vivienne loves nobody except herself. Her own face and body and the financial well-being of the total woman—those are the *only* ideas in her head. She doesn't love that thing—she just wants to grab the fees she can get from hiring it out for breeding purposes. And it's not even her dog, by the way."

"Is it yours?"

"I paid for it. She got the idea that my mother, who was dying of cancer, needed a dog to comfort her in the last days of her life. She picked out this *wildly* expensive breed of poodle, paid for it herself by cheque, then got the sum out of me in cash. This was in the early days of our brief marriage. If it had been a few weeks later I would have demanded a receipt."

"Do I gather she's taken you to the cleaners?"

"Looks like she'll get most of what she wants. Except for the house. That's something she's *really* sore about. I'd said when I first met her that I had a "family place" near Bergen. It gives the wrong idea in English. She thought I owned a minor stately home. From the moment she saw it she realized she'd been taken in by her own greed, and when she realized that family properties are specially protected under Norwegian law, she was determined that everything *else* she could get her hands on, she would. And very

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effective she's been, too, considering she's a foreigner. Mind you, she made a profession out of it in Britain."

"Made a profession of what?"

"Marrying money and then getting the lion's share of it. She'd had three earlier marriages, and all the husbands were left with just the Y-fronts they stood up in. If I'd known that when I married her, it goes without saying I wouldn't have."

"I see. So what would you say all this is about?"

"I'd say it was a scam to wring just that bit extra out of me. She'll be saying I've got a dog she paid for, and that'll be one more item in the account. And she'll probably be saying I'm making some enormous sum from breeding from it, and put that in, too. She banks on making so much trouble that in the end you throw up your hands and pay up. The English husbands did, but not this cookie. No, sir!"

We had a lot to think about on our way back to Bergen. Whether Svein actually thought is another matter. Certainly there was no sign of productive ratiocination when we got back to Camilla Collets gate. We followed someone into the flats just as Svein had said any intruder could do, and then he headed for the stairs. I sat down with a bump and looked him in the eyes. That was to make him feel stupid. Then I pulled up my rump and headed down the corridor to Vidar Sunderberg's flat. You'd think a detective might have made a connection between a woman who is getting good advice on her divorce settlement and a tax adviser living in the same building, wouldn't you? Even if he did cover up by pretending hostility.

At my insistence, Svein rang, twice. Then he looked at me: Wonder of wonders—he'd made the connection! He took out his bank card, slipped it in where the Yale lock was, and in a moment we were in the flat and I was greeting Osvald, who was very friendly for a dog that was supposed to be guarding the flat.

Formalities over (when will human beings realize how much can be learnt by sniffing each other's bottoms?) I got down to business. Osvald's traces were everywhere, but they couldn't hide the fact that another dog had been there as well. It was in the smallest room, the second bedroom, that little Lord Fondlepaws had been kept. There were hairs, DNA samples, and, rather disgracefully, a trickle down the wall. Someone had forgotten his lavatorial good manners! But where, I wondered, was that someone? Probably on a plane to the Mother Country, that home of dog-neglecters.

Even Svein knew where we had to go next, though I doubt he had any clear idea what to do when he got there. In the event, he didn't need one. When we got to the top of the stairs, we could hear shouting and abuse. I guessed it came from number seventeen, and I was at the partly open door well before Svein.

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The living room was bedlam. It was Vidar Sunderberg who was doing most of the shouting. Facing him, naked as the day they were born, were Vivienne and the young man who had come to fix the door. Through the bedroom door I could see a spectacularly unmade bed. The two were quite shameless about their nudity, though they could see I was there, and could probably hear Svein puffing down the corridor.

"You just used me!" Sunderberg was shouting. "And now that all the divorce forms are in and the dog is on its way to England you're throwing me aside."

"Too right," said Vivienne aggressively, clutching the arm of her new protector.

"And I suppose I can whistle for my money?"

"You were paid," she said laconically. "In there." She gestured towards the bedroom.

"Well, at least I'll have your petty cash," he said, and made an unwise lunge towards a well-stuffed handbag on the table. If he had banked on getting there before lover-boy, he was mistaken. A tremendous punch in the guts, followed by a well-aimed heel in the same area, sent him backwards, howling, towards the door. We backed up too, getting out to the corridor half a second before he arrived, sobbing and holding himself. As we stood over the writhing body against the far wall, the door of Vivienne's flat, now splendidly secure presumably, was being locked and bolted.

Svein gave Sunderberg a swig of brandy from his hip flask, and eventually got him, crying with pain still, to his feet. They began to walk down the corridor, slowly, making it seem endless.

"Bloody woman!" Sunderberg spat. "I did everything for her."

"Fiddling her estate for the divorce settlement, I suppose?"

"Presenting it in the best possible light from her point of view. . . . Well, fiddling it, then. She knew most of the tricks. All the loot from her three previouses was in banks in places like Switzerland: They've remained stum about people who've committed much worse crimes than our Viv. I just had to get everything into legal form. She knew tricks I'd never have thought of in a million years."

"She minimised her own assets and maximised his, I suppose?"

"That's right. She belongs to an organization called Divorcands Anonymous."

"I've never heard that word."

"I think they made it up. It means people, i.e. women, in the process of divorcing. Officially, they're just offering help and advice. Actually, they sail *very* close to the wind by suggesting all sorts of legal scams to maximise the divorcées' take-home share. The dog scam was Vivienne's idea, and it was just a sideline to the main ones that will really bring in the loot. She'd taken the dog

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with her when they separated because it was valuable in itself, and had a rich potential in breeding fees. Then she thought that as she had a receipt for it, she could accuse her husband of taking it and add it to his assets, including potential in breeding fees. Twenty thousand kroner for the dog, then perhaps thirty thousand in potential fees. At the moment it's on its way back to England, and she's on course to make a packet, one way or another. Not that she *needs* money. It's just that she loves it."

So that was it: our first excursion into welfare detective work. A whole day's slog and not a hope of getting a single øre for it. To cap it all, Svein added to his costs by ringing Torbjørn Sæthre and telling him of his wife's little schemes. I thought all the people involved in the business were so unsavoury they deserved no consideration.

"So Fondlepaws is on his way to England now, is he?" asked Sæthre as the call drew to a close.

"That's right. To a breeding kennel."

"Hmm. I think Vivienne is going to be disappointed."

"Oh, I doubt it," said Svein. "I've made enquiries. Those poodles are worth a packet, and the stud fees are very high. There could be income from them for years."

"I think not. You see, I was always curious, when the marriage was breaking up, as to why Viv was suddenly so affectionate towards the pooch, always toting it around and crooning over it. There had to be a selfish reason, because Viv can't feel affection. On consideration, it had to be possible breeding fees. So the day before she took off I had a friend round. He's a good friend . . . and a vet."

"You mean he—?"

"One little snip, and the prospect of stud fees was gone forever."

And the pair of them roared with laughter for minutes on end.

I was shocked to the core. Disgusted. That a vet in a civilised country like Norway could do a thing like that! Even for a friend, such a crime was beyond belief. I just had to try and convey my revulsion, which was a moral one, and as strong for a poodle as it would have been for a real dog. When Svein, his shoulders still shaking, sat down on the sofa with a cup of coffee, I lay in front of him, my eyes fixed on his thoughtless face, an expression of the utmost distaste on my face.

"Got a touch of indigestion, old boy?" asked Svein. ●

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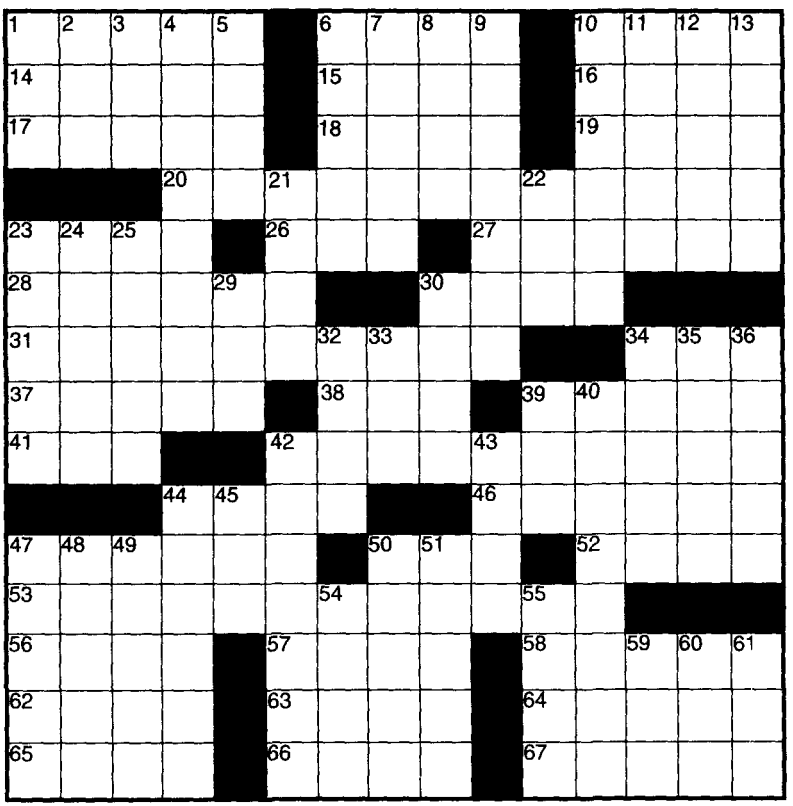
True?

by Ruth Minary



Solution on page 114

ACROSS

1. Thaw as Inspector ____
6. There ought to be ____
10. Peter J. Heck's Twain
14. Spirit in *The Tempest*
15. Thing for Carmen Iarrera
16. Gordianus the Finder's others
17. Coral reef
18. Month in the Jewish calendar
19. List
20. Don't believe him! (Faye Kellerman)

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23. Military offense
26. "____ the ramparts"
27. Mitigates
28. Poet Amy or James Russell
30. Dirk
31. Dark? (Caroline Llewellyn)
34. Maigret's summer
37. i. e., unabbreviated
38. Actress Charlotte
39. Beauty or literary ____
41. January hrs. in New York
42. Bloodhound on the wrong trail? (Ngaio Marsh)
44. First murderer
46. Gadget for oranges and lemons
47. Creator of Midnight Louis, ____ Nelson Douglas
50. Kind of doll
52. Circumstances at times
53. ____ and you're dead!
56. Remove (one's hat, e.g.)
57. Agatha's title
58. Mrs. Pollifax
62. Follows chick
63. Another name for Sister Fidelma's country
64. Slight coloration
65. Dry
66. Common victims of poison
67. Purposes

DOWN

1. Sheep's cry
2. Morsel
3. ____ Grande
4. Without personal concern
5. Jazz's Fitzgerald
6. ____ *for Appeal*, Lesley Egan
7. Star of *The Brighton Strangler,* John ____
8. Urgent letters!
9. Necessary for an arrest
10. Miss Jane ____, resident of St. Mary Mead
11. Greeting for Magnum, P.I.
12. *The Life of* ____, '50's popular TV comedy
13. Pipers wear them
21. Lounge
22. Cheer for the matador
23. Title role for Michael Caine
24. Plants of the mustard family
25. Small hooter
29. Allow
30. "____ Leaving Home," Lennon–McCartney
32. Once Persia
33. ____ Friday, female assistant
34. Fragrant resin
35. Used in a printer or copier
36. ____ *nous*
39. Opposite of NNW
40. Where Kate Fansler and Nikki Chase sleuth
42. Plays Right, Left, or Center
43. Therefore
44. Poirot solves the mystery in *Black* ____
45. ____ mode
47. Concluding passages in musical compositions
48. Negative terminal
49. Direct
50. Pay
51. Choir rejoinders
54. Ms. Paretsky
55. Dr. Nightingale and her colleagues, familiarly
59. Found in pens
60. Size on a T-shirt
61. Word of agreement

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BIBLE BELT

by Toni L. P. Kelner

It took Wynette a while to find the Ten Commandments in the Bible Reverend Sweeney had left for her to read while she was in the hospital. She thought they'd be marked, but they were just stuck in with the other verses. Finally she found them in the book of Exodus. There were commandments about stealing and killing and coveting, but nothing against hitting your wife.

There was nothing about doing other things to your wife, either. Wynette found the commandment about adultery, but that was just for people who weren't married. With Duke being her husband, it must be okay with God for him to throw her onto the bed and do whatever he wanted. If it wasn't, He'd have made a commandment against it.

The next chapter had all kinds of other rules, and she read them, too. They weren't commandments, exactly, but since they were in the Bible, they must be God's will. There was a lot about smiting men and neighbors, mothers and fathers, and even servants, but nothing about smiting wives. She'd have thought that a wife was more important than a servant, but maybe God didn't see it that way.

Then Wynette found something about how you shouldn't make a woman miscarry, but when she read the rest of the verse, she saw it only counted if it was another man's wife. Did that mean that God didn't mind that Duke had made her miscarry his own child?

Could it fit under killing? Reverend Sweeney said abortion was murder, that just because a baby wasn't born yet didn't mean he wasn't a baby. Or she. Dr. Patel hadn't told her which hers was—it was probably too little for him to tell. Anyway, Wynette knew from

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Toni L. P. Kelner is a Southerner who has lived in Massachusetts for more than fourteen years. To save plane fare, she told us, she goes back home to North Carolina via the pages of her fiction. Her seventh novel featuring series character Laura Fleming was published in October of 2001. The characters in this new story are not part of her regular series, but the action is set in a nearby town. †

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her cousin that an abortion didn't hurt nearly as much as Duke hitting her in the stomach had.

Duke had told Dr. Patel he hadn't known she was pregnant, even though he had, so wasn't that bearing false witness? But the Bible only said you couldn't bear false witness against your neighbor, nothing about bearing false witness against your wife. Of course, Wynette had gone to Sunday school enough to know that *neighbor* in the Bible wasn't the same as a neighbor who lived next to you. "Love thy neighbor" was supposed to apply to everybody, but maybe God didn't care what men did to their wives. It seemed to Wynette that if He did, He'd have done something about Duke a long time ago. If not the first time he slapped her, then later on, when it got bad. Why hadn't God done something when Duke hit her so hard she lost a tooth? Or the time he cracked her ribs?

She tried to read more, but the talk about oxen and feasts confused her. The print was awfully small, and her head was spinning from the medicine they'd given her. Besides, it didn't look as if God had anything to say about her. That seemed funny, because she'd gone to church every week until she got married. Then she had to quit, because Duke went out on Saturday nights and it bothered him for her to take a shower and get dressed the next morning. Now when she woke up on Sundays, she'd lie in the bed waiting for him to stir before she got up. Sometimes she had to pee so bad it hurt, but she could stand that a whole lot easier than she could stand what a hungover Duke would do if he were woken early.

Wynette carefully closed the Bible and put it on the nightstand next to the bed. She wasn't sure if Reverend Sweeney had been giving it to her or only loaning it, so she wanted to be sure to take care of it. Then she looked for the TV control, but it was out of her reach. She didn't think Duke had put it there on purpose, because it would have been easier for him to not rent the TV for her in the first place. Besides, he was always nice to her when she was in the hospital.

She thought about calling a nurse to get her the control, but the nurses must have more important things to worry about than her. The hospital was filled with sick people, and Wynette wasn't really sick. The doctor had said she'd be able to try and have another baby. Only next time she'd make sure Duke was ready to start a family.

Wynette had expected her husband to be as excited as she was about the news. She'd been in the bedroom putting on makeup when Duke got home from work, because it was Friday night and she'd thought sure he'd want to go out to celebrate. But before she could tell him, he started in on her because she'd forgotten to get more beer. He'd hit her once or maybe twice before she could say anything, and then she'd blurted it out, not at all the way she'd

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planned, just to make him stop. Only it didn't make him stop. Hearing about the baby just made him madder. By the time Duke had stopped hurting her, their baby was dead.

Now Wynette knew that she was going to have to make sure she didn't get pregnant again until Duke said it was okay. The thing was, he wouldn't use a rubber. Birth-control pills cost money, and Duke wasn't the type to pay attention to a calendar when he was in the mood. Maybe she could get a diaphragm. Her sister, Lynn, didn't use hers anymore, so Wynette could borrow it and it wouldn't cost Duke anything.

There was a tap at the door, and Wynette looked up and saw Belva Tucker.

"Hey, Wynette," Belva said.

"Hey, Belva."

Belva came in and pulled one of the chairs over close to the bed so they could talk without Wynette having to hold her head up. Belva was always thoughtful that way. Some people thought Belva wasn't gentle the way a woman should be because of her being one of Rocky Shoals's deputies, but Wynette knew better. She always came to see Wynette when she was in the hospital or sick. Most times she brought candy or a magazine or even flowers.

Belva must have remembered that, too, because she said, "I'm sorry I don't have anything for you. I came to see Dr. Patel, and I didn't even know you were here until he mentioned it." She hesitated a minute. "I'm awfully sorry about the baby."

"That's all right, Belva. It's probably for the best."

"You mean because of Duke?" Belva asked, and Wynette could tell that her friend was mad.

"Of course not," Wynette said quickly, not wanting Belva mad at her. "I just mean that there must have been something wrong with the baby or God wouldn't have taken him. Reverend Sweeney said God was being merciful."

Belva didn't look as if she believed Wynette or Reverend Sweeney, but she nodded anyway. "Is there anything I can get you?"

"You don't have to bring me anything, Belva. They're taking good care of me."

"They ought to. They see you enough." Before Wynette had a chance to answer that, Belva added, "I bet you wouldn't turn down a bag of Hershey's Kisses."

Wynette grinned and managed to keep from wincing, even though her mouth still hurt from where Duke had slapped her. "Belva, have you ever known me to turn down Hershey's Kisses?"

"Then I'll be sure and bring you some tomorrow after church."

"Aren't you sweet. But I might not be here that long. Dr. Patel says I might can go home in the morning."

"That's all right—I'll find you," she said with a grin. But she got

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that mad look again before she said, "Are you going to be needing a place to stay when you get out of here?"

Wynette tried to pretend she didn't know what Belva meant. "Of course not. Duke will be here to take me home."

Belva nodded and sighed a little, as if she was sad about something.

Just to get her thinking about something else, Wynette said, "Are you still chasing after those hijackers?"

"You know me—I never give up," Belva said, and from the tone of her voice, Wynette knew she wasn't just talking about hijackers. "That's why I'm up here, as a matter of fact. They found another trucker with his head bashed in this morning."

"Is he going to be all right?"

"He should recover, but it's going to be a few days before I can talk to him. There's no telling where those bastards will be by then." She politely added, "Pardon my French."

"That's all right," Wynette said. Lord knows Duke said worse than that every day, and besides, she didn't blame Belva for cussing. For months, a band of hijackers had been tormenting truckers all up and down the highways of North Carolina, and they seemed to be centered around their area. According to the TV news, the whole state depended on the trucking industry, which Wynette hadn't realized before. So if truckers started getting scared and taking jobs elsewhere, it could hurt everybody. And the truckers had every right to be scared—one man had already been killed.

"You'd think the truckers would stop picking up hitchhikers," Wynette said.

Belva said, "This one didn't. They found him at a rest stop, and it looks as if that's where he was attacked. I'm guessing he stopped to take a leak, and they jumped him in the john. From now on, I bet the truckers are going to be peeing in empty bottles rather than stop anywhere around here."

"What was he carrying? Was it valuable?"

"We're still trying to find out. The hijackers took all the paperwork along with the truck. It looks as if they're just hitting trucks at random, anyway. They sell the loads for whatever they can get, strip the trucks of anything else worth selling, and dump the rest." She looked at her watch. "Well, I better be getting on. You call if you need anything."

"Thanks, but Duke will be here later."

Belva made a noise that was almost a snort as she got up from her chair. She was halfway out the door when she turned back and asked, "Come to think of it, where was your husband last night?"

"Duke? He was here with me." Once he realized how badly hurt she was, he'd driven her right to the hospital.

"All night?"

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"Well, he went home at bedtime, of course." Wynette had hoped he'd come back that morning, since it was Saturday and he didn't have to work, but with Reverend Sweeney and Belva visiting, she hadn't been too lonely. "Why do you ask?"

"Just wondering."

"Belva, you've been working too hard," Wynette said, trying to make it sound as if it were a joke. "You'll be seeing hijackers under the bed before long." She smiled as if she knew Belva was kidding.

Belva didn't smile back—she just looked at her as if there was something she wanted to say. Then she put the TV control right where Wynette could reach it before she left.

Wynette kept smiling until Belva was gone, even though it hurt her lip. Once, a long time ago, Wynette had called Belva after Duke beat her up. Belva had arrested Duke, even put handcuffs on him, but Wynette just couldn't let her take him away. She had still loved him then, so she swore to Belva that it was the first time it had happened, and that she was sure it wouldn't happen again.

That night was the last time she could remember going to church, other than for weddings and funerals. She'd asked Reverend Sweeney to unlock the door for her, and she stayed there for hours asking forgiveness for lying to Belva about it being the first time, and then begging God to make the second part come true, to make sure Duke never hit her again. She didn't want Him to strike Duke down with lightning or anything—she just wanted him to quit hitting her. Was that too much of a miracle to ask for? Maybe it was, because God didn't listen. So that meant she'd lied to Belva twice, and she still felt bad about it. Three times, now, she realized. Duke had left way before bedtime the night before.

Wynette turned on the TV, but there was nothing on but ball games, so she turned the sound way down but didn't shut off the set because Duke was paying good money for her to have that TV in her room.

Wynette looked over at the Bible. Reverend Sweeney had said that God did everything for a reason, which meant that He must have a reason for letting Duke hit her. Was it something she'd done? Whatever it was, it must have been something awfully bad. She was trying to think of what it could be when she fell asleep.

The next thing she knew, the evening news was on and Duke had the control and was turning the sound up so he could hear it.

"Hey, Duke," she said, croaking a little because her throat was dry.

He poured some water into a plastic cup and held it for her to drink, even though she could have done it herself.

"The ice melted," he said. "I'll tell the nurse to get you some fresh."

She smiled at him. "That's all right. This is plenty cold."

He helped her take another sip, then started to put the water

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pitcher down on top of the Bible on the nightstand.

"Don't put it there," Wynette said. Then she saw the look in his eye. "I mean, let me get this out of your way." She reached for the Bible, meaning to put it into the drawer of the nightstand, but Duke took it from her first.

"Where'd that come from?" he asked.

"Reverend Sweeney came to visit this morning and left it for me."

"Why? Does he think we can't afford a Bible?"

"Of course not," Wynette said quickly. "He was just being nice."

"Next time you see him, you tell him that when you need a Bible, I'll get you one."

"I'll be sure to. I was going to give him that one back anyway."

Duke nodded, but he put the Bible back on the nightstand and made a point of putting the pitcher right on top of it. "Are they treating you all right? You tell me if they don't."

"They're being real nice."

"They damn well better be. I'm paying them enough."

No matter what happened in private, Duke made sure everybody else treated her the way they should.

"I've been talking to the doctor," he said, looking serious. "We think it would be better if you went ahead and had a—If they gave you a—"

"What, Duke? Is there something else wrong?" She breathed in sharply. "It's not cancer, is it?" Her mama had died from cancer, and her daddy's father had been sick with cancer when he had his heart attack. That meant she had it on both sides.

"No, it's nothing like that."

"It's not—" She couldn't even say AIDS out loud. She'd never slept with anybody but Duke, but she knew Duke had been with other women before they got married, and probably since then, too.

"You're not sick," Duke said, with that edge in his voice that told her she better not interrupt him again. "It's just that we think you ought to get your tubes tied so you don't get pregnant again, not after what happened this time."

"But Dr. Patel said I could get pregnant again in a few months."

"It's not getting pregnant that's the problem. He says you can't carry a child."

"Why not? Why didn't he tell me?"

Duke shrugged. "I guess he couldn't tell right off. But he looked at your test results and figured it out after I told him about your family history, the way your sister and your mama lost all those babies."

"Lots of women lose babies," Wynette protested. "I heard on *Oprah* that half the women in America miscarry. Almost all of them go on to have babies."

"Maybe so, but you can't. There's something wrong with you,

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otherwise you wouldn't have lost this one just from falling down a *couple of steps.*"

That's what Duke had told Dr. Patel, that she'd fallen. She'd been surprised that he believed it, but Dr. Patel was young and new in town. Besides, Duke had a way of saying things that kept most folks from arguing with him.

He went on. "Anyway, he said we ought to take care of it while you're still here in the hospital. We've already met the deductible, so it won't cost us a penny more than what we owe now."

No more pennies, Wynette thought, but it'd cost her all her babies. "Is he sure?" she asked anxiously. "Can't he do some more tests? Or get a second opinion? Oprah says that you should never have something serious done without getting a second opinion."

"It'd just be a waste of money," Duke said. "You can't carry a child and I'm not about to keep carting you up here to the hospital every time you get yourself knocked up."

"But Duke—"

"Besides, I don't want any children."

"Duke!" she said in a shocked whisper. "You never told me that. When we got married, you said you wanted a house full of kids."

"That was before I saw how much trouble they are. Look at your sister's crew. A man can't hardly hear himself think with those three rug-rats running around. They're loud, and they talk back, and they make the worst mess I've ever seen."

"I can keep kids quiet, Duke—they don't talk back if they're taught not to. And I can keep the house clean. Don't I get it all cleaned up when you have your poker games, even before you get up the next morning?"

There was a glint in Duke's eye, as if he thought she was criticizing him, but he let it go and Wynette relaxed. Then he said, "You can't carry a child anyway, so none of that makes any difference. They've scheduled the surgery for first thing Monday morning. It'll be over with before you know it, and if everything goes the way it's supposed to, you'll be home Tuesday."

"Do we have to do it so soon?"

"It's already been scheduled," he said impatiently. He picked up a clipboard with a bunch of papers that had been lying at the foot of the bed. "You need to sign these."

"What are they?" she said, taking them from him and starting to read the one on top.

"Just sign where I tell you," he said, sticking a ballpoint pen into her hand.

"Oprah says that you should never sign anything without reading it first."

"I don't care *what* that black bitch says," he said quietly, so nobody passing by could hear. "Just sign it!"

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Wynette thought about her sister's children, the two girls and a boy Lynn had carried with no trouble at all, even if she had lost her first baby. And she thought about the trash bag filled with hand-me-down baby clothes that Lynn had given her. It didn't seem right that those clothes would never get worn again. Didn't the Bible say that wasting was a sin?

Then she pictured a little girl limping when she walked, the way Wynette did that time Duke kicked her so hard. She imagined a boy with her daddy's blue eyes, but not hardly being able to tell what color they were because of swelling. Surely God didn't want that to happen. So maybe He didn't want her to have babies. Maybe it was like Reverend Sweeney had said, that this was God's way of being merciful.

She signed the papers.

Duke said, "I've got to give these to the nurse, and then I'm heading out."

"So soon? The nurse said husbands can stay as late as they want to."

"I've already wasted most of the weekend here, and I've got things to do. I have to call old man Crawford to see about getting a substitute for Monday morning, and then I need to get me something to eat. You never did the grocery shopping."

"Will you be back tomorrow?"

"I don't know. It depends."

Wynette wondered if Duke meant to go out drinking with the boys or maybe even with one of the other women she'd always suspected. "But you will be here Monday morning for the operation, won't you?"

"Why the hell would I need a substitute if I wasn't going to be here?"

"I'm so glad," she said, smiling at him.

Only he didn't see it because he was reaching for his ball cap, and muttering, "Maybe Crawford will let me make the time up so I don't have to use any of my vacation time."

"Good night, Duke." But he was already gone.

After the nurse brought her dinner, Wynette watched TV for a little while, but she had to change channels whenever anything with children came on the screen. Then she tried to call her sister, but when there was no answer, she remembered that Lynn and her family had gone to Myrtle Beach for the weekend. Wynette had written the name of the hotel where they were staying on the pad beside the phone at home, but she couldn't remember it and knew that calling Duke would be a waste of time. Even if he was home, he probably wouldn't want her calling Lynn. Maybe it was just as well. By the time Lynn got back Sunday night, visiting hours would be over anyway. She'd have to wait to talk to her until

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after the . . . Afterward.

Wynette closed her eyes, but she couldn't sleep. She just kept thinking of the way babies smell and the little noises they make. Duke was right about Lynn's children being wild, but her sister wasn't good with children the way Wynette was. It was Wynette who'd babysat the kids at church during services, and watched over the younger cousins at family weddings and such. Lynn had said herself that the only reason her three minded as well as they did was because of the time Wynette had spent with them before she and Duke got married.

She wriggled in the bed, trying to get comfortable. Maybe Duke would let her spend more time over at Lynn's after she got back home. That would be almost as good as having her own kids, wouldn't it? She rolled over and saw the Bible still sitting on the nightstand. The pitcher of water on top of it had sweated so that there was a ring of water on the black leatherette cover, hiding the words *Holy Bible.*

Wynette's mama had always told her to never put anything on top of a Bible, not even another book, so she knew she should move the pitcher and wipe off the water before it ruined the cover. She didn't—she just looked at it, watching more droplets form and run down the sides of the pitcher and onto the Bible. She wondered if Reverend Sweeney would be mad at her, or if God Himself would be mad at her. Then she snorted. What had God ever done for her? He'd given her Duke and taken away her babies. Mad at her? Well, damn it, she was mad at Him, too!

"Damn it," she said, but in a whisper, as if lightning would strike if she said it too loud. Nothing happened, not even when she repeated it a minute later. It seemed pretty plain that God wasn't listening to her. Maybe He never had.

She said, "Damn it," one more time, this time in a good, strong voice. Then she rolled over and went to sleep, leaving the pitcher to drip onto the Bible.

The next morning, the nurses helped Wynette get up and walk around, and it didn't hurt nearly as bad as she thought it would. It seemed as if it should hurt more to lose a baby. Of course, she'd heard that having tubes tied didn't hurt much at all, and having that done would lose her her babies for good.

Then the nurse asked if she wanted help going down to the chapel on the first floor for what she called nondenominational services. Wynette started to say that she did, but then she remembered that she didn't care about what God wanted anymore. So she said she didn't feel up to it.

The only thing was, that didn't leave her anything to do with herself. Somebody would come in once in a while to check on her, and people came by to deliver meal trays and clean the bathroom,

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but otherwise, she was left alone. Reverend Sweeney's Bible was still on the nightstand, but Wynette didn't even look at it. Instead she watched TV and dozed all day long.

The door to her room opening woke her late in the afternoon, and she put on a welcoming smile for her husband, but it was Belva who walked into the room.

"Hey there, Belva," she said, not having to fake the smile anymore.

"Hey there, yourself. I brought you something." She held out a tin that was decorated to look like a merry-go-round.

"Isn't that the cutest thing!" Wynette said, delighted.

"No big deal," Belva said with a shrug. "I was just going to get a bag of kisses, but every time I open one of those bags, I spill the candy all over everywhere, so I thought you might want something to keep them in."

"Thank you, Belva."

Her friend shrugged again, looking embarrassed. "I was afraid I'd missed you. I meant to get by sooner, but I had to go in to work after church."

"Actually, I'm going to be here for a couple more days," Wynette said, trying to sound casual about it.

Belva's eyes narrowed. "Did Duke—?"

Wynette quickly said, "It's because I'm having surgery tomorrow morning."

"Is something wrong?"

"No, I'm just getting my tubes tied."

"I thought you wanted children."

Wynette shrugged, not wanting to talk about her failings. It was embarrassing enough that Duke and Dr. Patel knew there was something wrong with her. "I guess I changed my mind."

That's when Duke walked in. "What's she doing here?" he said to Wynette, glaring at the deputy.

"I'm visiting Wynette," Belva said. "Is that a problem, Cloyd?"

They always talked that way. Duke called Belva *Deputy Tucker* because he didn't think a woman should be a police officer, and Belva called him *Cloyd* because she knew that he hated his given name.

"I hear there aren't going to be any little Cloyds," Belva said. "I suppose we should thank the Lord for small favors."

Duke's face changed colors the way it did when he got mad but couldn't do anything about it. "I'd just as soon you didn't make fun of my wife. It's not her fault that her parts aren't right."

Belva turned to Wynette. "Is that true?"

Wynette nodded, and looked away.

In a much softer voice, Belva said, "I'm sorry, Wynette. Why didn't you say something?"

Wynette shrugged again, her throat too tight to talk.

"You're sure there's nothing they can do about it?"

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Duke said, "I think the doctor can do his job without your help, Deputy. In fact, I think the whole town would be a lot better off without you sticking your nose into everybody's business."

Belva stepped forward until she was right in Duke's face, and just stared at him while his face got redder. Cloyd leaned closer to Belva, as if he wanted her to move out of his way, but Belva didn't so much as move a muscle. Wynette could tell from the way her husband was breathing that he wanted to hit Belva something fierce, but he didn't dare, not with her being a deputy. Finally he had to back down, and aimed his glare at Wynette instead.

"What's that?" he asked, thumping the can on her lap.

"Just some candy Belva brought me," Wynette said. "Do you want some?"

"Hell, no," he snapped, picking up the can and putting it on the nightstand, on top of the Bible. "You shouldn't be eating candy anyway."

"The nurses said—" Wynette saw his face darken and said, "You're probably right, Duke. I don't suppose it's good for me."

"I brought you something *nice,*" he said, looking at Belva pointedly as he dropped a heavy book on Wynette's lap.

"It's a Bible," Wynette said, surprised. Covered in white imitation leather, it had a color picture of Jesus on the cover, and gold curlicues and plastic gemstones framing the picture. She'd never seen such a flashy Bible.

"You can tell Reverend Sweeney that he can just take that cheap copy back," Duke said.

Now Wynette understood. Reverend Sweeney hadn't meant anything by leaving her the Bible, but Duke couldn't stand the idea that somebody might think he couldn't afford one for her. Or maybe he didn't even want her talking to God without knowing what was being said. Still, it was a nice gift, and she said, "Thank you, Duke. This sure is something."

"Yeah, it sure is," Belva said. "You must have had to go all the way to Charlotte to find something that fancy." Only she didn't sound as if she thought "fancy" was a good thing, and Duke clenched his jaw.

"You didn't go to all that trouble, did you, Duke?" Wynette asked, worried that he'd hold it over her if he had.

"Of course not," Duke snapped. "I bought it at the flea market, not that it's any of Deputy Tucker's business."

"A flea-market Bible," Belva said. "Why am I not surprised?"

Duke shot Belva a dirty look, but with no way to get the mad out of his system, he reached into his back pocket for his pack of Winstons.

"You can't smoke in here," Belva said with a mean smile. "It's

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against the law, which means that I'd have to arrest you if you lit up."

"There's laws about police harassment, too, you know," Duke said, shoving the cigarettes back into his pocket, and he stomped out of the room.

"Wynette, are you sure you want to go through with this?" Belva said as soon as he was gone. "You don't have to make up your mind right now. You just had a miscarriage—don't you want to take a few days to think it over?"

"It's all been arranged, Belva."

"Have you talked to your sister? What does she think?"

"I couldn't get her. Besides, it wouldn't make any difference."

"What about Reverend Sweeney? Did you speak to him?"

"I don't think he can help me, Belva. Not with this." She couldn't imagine talking to any man about not being able to carry a baby.

"Listen to me," Belva said, touching Wynette's hand. "You don't have to put up with what Duke does to you. There's services and shelters and people who understand what you're going through. There's places you can get help."

Wynette wanted to believe her, she really did, but she just didn't. She looked down in her lap, and opened the Bible to the front, where they'd put in spaces to record family births. Almost without her realizing it, tears started to roll down her face and onto the page.

"Oh, Wynette," Belva said, closing the Bible and taking it away. "Why won't you let me help you?"

"Nobody can help me, Belva." From over her friend's shoulder, she saw Duke come back into the room. "You better go."

Belva took a deep breath, and let it out slowly. "All right. I'll be back tomorrow to check on you."

Duke said, "That won't be necessary, Deputy. I've told the nurses that I don't want you bothering my wife anymore."

Belva didn't so much as look at him. "I'll see you tomorrow, Wynette." Then she did something kind of peculiar. She started to put Wynette's new Bible on the nightstand, but stopped and looked at the back cover. Then she looked up at Duke with her eyes narrowed before heading for the door.

"Bitch!" Duke said, long before Belva was out of earshot. "She's got no business coming here."

"I like Belva," Wynette said, not willing to let him bad-mouth her friend. "She's always real nice to me."

"Of course she's nice. She's trying to get into your pants."

"Duke!"

"Hell, Wynette, anybody with two eyes can see that she's nothing but a bull dyke. Why do you think I keep telling her to stay away from you?"

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Wynette didn't believe it, but she knew better than to argue with Duke.

He stayed around a little while longer, but Wynette suspected it was mostly to make sure Belva didn't come back. She tried to make conversation with him about what else he'd seen at the flea market, but all he wanted to do was watch TV. When the nurse brought in Wynette's dinner tray, he told her he'd see her in the morning, took a handful of candy from her merry-go-round can, and left.

Wynette wasn't all that hungry, but she dutifully ate her food, and when the nurse offered her something to help her sleep, she took that, too. The last thing she wanted was to be up all night thinking.

Two nurses woke her up early the next morning, even earlier than she usually got up to fix Duke's breakfast. They put an IV in her arm and did things to get her ready for the operation. Then they left her alone for a long time, and she wondered why they hadn't just let her sleep the extra half an hour, so she wouldn't worry so much. She knew from *Oprah* that having tubes tied was a routine procedure, but she was feeling awfully nervous by the time Duke finally showed up, a little while after the time scheduled for the operation.

"Haven't they started yet?" he demanded.

"Not yet. I was afraid you wouldn't make it in time." It was hard to keep that last part from sounding critical, but Wynette couldn't help it. It seemed to her that the least Duke could do was to be there for her surgery.

He shot her a look, but must not have been sure how she meant it. "I got caught in the traffic on Highway 321—I bet the doctor got stuck in it, too. Haven't you heard what's going on out there?"

She shook her head.

"Those morons we've got for police around here finally caught up with the hijackers! Then the hijackers tried to make a break for it and took off down the highway in a stolen tractor-trailer, but they jackknifed and spilled the load all over the highway. You never saw such a commotion in your life. Must have been a dozen police cruisers there, and reporters, and a clean-up crew, and I don't know who all was wandering around, getting in the way."

Duke turned on the TV, looking for more news about the wreck. After watching the live coverage, Wynette didn't blame Duke for being late. Traffic was still backed up for miles.

Eventually the nurse came in and said the doctor had finally arrived, and that they'd be ready in a little while. Duke went to get a cup of coffee, but promised to be back before they took her into the operating room.

Just to distract herself, Wynette kept watching the news, even though they kept repeating the same story over and over again. They said part of the problem with the traffic was the boxes of

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cargo all over the highway, and the way cars were going out of their way to keep from hitting them.

"I wonder what's in those boxes," Wynette said to herself.

"Bibles," a voice said. Belva was standing at the door. "They've got most of them out of the way, but people won't drive fast because they're afraid of running over a Bible. Don't that beat all?"

"Bibles?" Wynette said.

"That's right. You know how they call this part of the country the Bible Belt? One of the reporters from Charlotte said he's going to start calling 321 the Bible Beltway." Her friend shook her head. "I never saw so many big white Bibles with pictures of Jesus on the cover."

"Is that right?" Wynette said feebly, trying not to look over at the one Duke had brought her the day before.

Duke came in then, and when he saw Belva, he thundered, "I told them to keep you out of here!"

Belva just grinned. "Sorry about that, Cloyd. I just came by to tell Wynette about catching the hijackers. I thought she'd want to know, what with you being involved and all."

Wynette swallowed hard, thinking of all the nights Duke had been gone with no explanation. "Belva, you're not saying that Duke . . . ?" She couldn't find the right words to finish the question.

"Him?" Belva said with a sneer. "Cloyd, a hijacker? Not hardly. Cloyd isn't even in their league. The hijackers are career criminals, not pissants who beat up on women."

"Why you—!" Duke started, his face nearly purple with rage.

Belva went on as if he hadn't spoken. "No, what led us to the hijackers was that Bible Cloyd bought for you at the flea market. All he cared about was getting one cheap, so he didn't notice what was written on the back. It's printed right on there that this is a special gift for members of the PTL Club in Charlotte. A lot of those televangelists send prizes to people who send in enough money, but they don't actually sell them, so they shouldn't have had any at the flea market. That got me to thinking about that last truck that got hijacked. The driver was still unconscious, so he couldn't tell us what he'd been carrying, so I called the PTL Club, and sure enough, they were expecting a delivery. The flea market had already closed when I found out, so it took me until this morning to track down the folks that had been selling the Bibles. When I found them, darned if they didn't have the stolen truck. I called for backup, they ran, and we chased them down. And it was all because of your husband buying a Bible he should have known was stolen."

"Don't blame me if you can't catch a bunch of thieving sons of bitches," Duke said.

Belva smiled, but Wynette thought it looked more like she was baring her teeth. "Maybe they are thieving sons of bitches, but I

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bet none of them are the kind of weasel who'd lie to his wife about her needing to have her tubes tied."

"What?" Wynette said, not sure she'd heard her friend right.

"Shut your mouth!" Duke bellowed. Wynette didn't know which of them he was talking to, but it didn't matter, because neither of them were listening.

"I suppose you know Dr. Patel got caught in the traffic jam, too," Belva said. "He left his car to come see if we needed his help, and since one of the hijackers had banged his head up pretty good when the truck went over, Patel helped sew him up and then rode over here in the ambulance with him. I came, too, to guard the hijacker, and we got to talking on the way. I knew he was supposed to do your surgery, and apologized for making him late, and he said it was no big deal because it's elective anyway." She repeated the word. "Elective."

"Elective means I don't *have* to have it done," Wynette said slowly.

"That's right. So I asked the doctor why you were doing it, and he told me what Duke said to him. Duke lied, Wynette, high, wide, and handsome."

"What?" Wynette looked over at her husband. He looked as if he were about ready to explode.

Belva said, "He told the doctor there was a history of miscarriages in your family."

"My mama and sister did miscarry."

"He also told Patel that you were an only child because your mother miscarried a dozen times before dying in childbirth."

"That's not true. I've got a sister and two brothers, and Mama only died a few years ago."

"Dr. Patel told Duke that even with what happened with your mother, there's no reason you should have any problems, but Duke told him you don't want to risk it, that you don't want children. That's the only reason he agreed to do the operation."

"Those papers I signed . . ." Wynette said slowly.

"Those papers said you knew it was an elective procedure."

Wynette put her hands over her face, wanting to hide from it all. But she knew she couldn't hide anymore. "Is it true, Duke? Is it true that there's nothing wrong with me?"

"Who are you going to believe? This bitch or me?"

"You told me I couldn't have babies, when the only reason I can't is because *you* don't want any." She stared at him—he'd done so much to her, but this was unthinkable. "You don't want me to have *anybody*, do you?"

"You listen here," he said, "I'm not going to have any brats squalling all night long, and I'm not going to have dirty diapers stinking up the place, and I'm not going to have my house looking

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like a pigsty. You're going to have that operation, and that's that."

"Good Lord, Duke," Wynette said. She was trying to take it in, but all she could do was wonder if that counted as taking the Lord's name in vain. Then she thought about the hijackers, who'd stolen Bibles, and the Bible Cloyd had bought from them that had helped Belva track them down. The Bibles blocking the highway had made Dr. Patel late, which had given Belva a chance to find out that Duke was lying.

Maybe it wasn't a lightning bolt or parting the Red Sea, but surely that was some kind of a miracle.

"I'm not having my tubes tied," Wynette said.

"The hell, you say!" Duke said.

"You heard me. I'm *not* having my tubes tied." She sat up as far as she could. "Duke, I've put up with more from you than any woman should have to, but I'm not putting up with this. I want babies." Duke started to speak, but before he could get the words out, she said, "I don't care if you want any or not, because I'm leaving you anyway."

"Like hell you are!" He raised one hand, but suddenly Belva was between him and Wynette's bed, her hand on the butt of her gun. "You touch her and I'll take you down right here and now."

He wanted to push past her, Wynette knew he did, but for once, *he* was afraid.

"Belva, you know the law better than I do," Wynette said. "Will I have any trouble getting a divorce?"

"Not hardly," Belva said. "With the hospital records and the reports I've filed about Cloyd, you could get every dollar he owns while you're at it. Hell, with the right judge, you could get away with killing him." Belva looked as if she thought that wouldn't be a bad idea.

Wynette watched Duke's face change colors for a few seconds, then said, "Go away, Duke. I don't want to see you again unless it's in court."

"Oh, you'll see me again," he said. He glared at her, then stomped out.

Wynette watched until he was gone, then said, "That's that."

"It's a start," Belva said, "but you heard what he said. I just know he's going to try something. Even with the law on your side, it's going to be hard."

"I know. Oprah says that when you finally leave an abuser is the most dangerous time." But maybe because she'd already had one miracle, it didn't seem so much to hope for another. "Belva, can you arrest Duke for making me miscarry?"

"You bet. He'll probably get out on bail, but I ought to be able to hold him long enough to get you settled someplace safe. You'll want to get a restraining order against him, too—I can help with that."

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"Thank you, Belva."

"And you know what? If I mention to those hijackers just how I found them, they might take care of Cloyd for you."

It was tempting, but Wynette had to say, "That probably wouldn't be a good thing to do." But she did add, "Though it might not hurt to let Duke *think* you were going to do it."

The two of them laughed, and Wynette couldn't remember when a laugh had felt so good.

The nurse came in then and said, "The doctor's ready."

"Well, I'm not," Wynette said, still laughing. "And I sure would appreciate it if you'd get this needle out of my arm."

It took a while for her and Belva to explain enough to satisfy the nurse, and then Dr. Patel had to come hear it for himself, but eventually everything got sorted out. Well, not everything. It was going to take Belva some time to get the warrants and all ready so she could arrest Duke, and once Dr. Patel knew what had really happened to Wynette, he wanted to run more tests to make sure she was all right. So she was going to have to spend another night in the hospital. But now that she knew it was the last time, she didn't mind so much.

Once she was alone, Wynette reached for her Bible. She'd given the stolen one to Belva for evidence, but she still had the one Reverend Sweeney had given her. She looked at the cover closely, but it didn't look as if the dripping water pitcher had left a mark after all. She opened it and started looking for a verse she knew had to be there. Didn't it say somewhere that the Lord helps those who help themselves? ●

Solution to the Mystery Crossword

M	O	R	S	E	■	A	L	A	W	■	M	A	R	K
A	R	I	E	L	■	C	O	S	A	■	A	L	I	I
A	T	O	L	L	■	A	D	A	R	■	R	O	L	L
■	■	■	F	A	L	S	E	P	R	O	P	H	E	T
A	W	O	L	■	O	E	R	■	A	L	L	A	Y	S
L	O	W	E	L	L	■	■	S	N	E	E	■	■	■
F	A	L	S	E	L	I	G	H	T	■	■	E	T	E
I	D	E	S	T	■	R	A	E	■	S	A	L	O	N
E	S	T	■	■	F	A	L	S	E	S	C	E	N	T
■	■	■	C	A	I	N	■	■	R	E	A	M	E	R
C	A	R	O	L	E	■	R	A	G	■	D	I	R	E
O	N	E	F	A	L	S	E	M	O	V	E	■	■	■
D	O	F	F	■	D	A	M	E	■	E	M	I	L	Y
A	D	E	E	■	E	R	I	N	■	T	I	N	G	E
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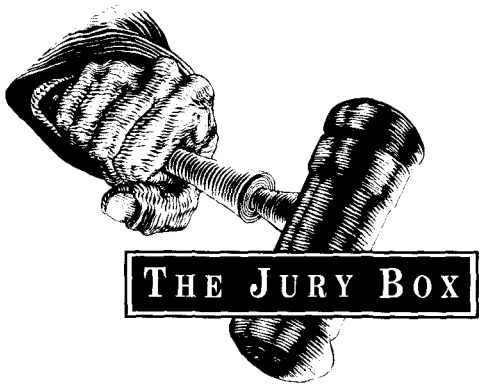

by Jon L. Breen

Though I started my book-reviewing career many years ago as a true-crime specialist for *Library Journal,* I've always had a preference for fictional malefaction. Still, as with many mystery fiction fans, a few classic cases hold a continuing fascination, usually those that are officially unsolved (Jack the Ripper, the Black Dahlia) or whose established solution has been called into question (Lizzie Borden, the Lindbergh kidnapping). All of these and several others are discussed with considerable detail, law-enforcement expertise, and plain common sense in the recently reprinted 2000 collection *The Cases That Haunt Us* (Pocket, $7.99) by retired FBI profiler John Douglas and his frequent collaborator Mark Olshaker.

A continuing theme is that most nonfiction reassessments of these famous cases truthfully represent a maverick branch of mystery fiction more than serious investigation or scholarship. For the way to publication and bestsellerdom is to provide a new and sensational theory of the case (e.g. the Duke of Clarence or J.K. Stephen as Jack the Ripper; Emma Borden or the maid Bridget as the Fall River ax wielder) and choose facts that fit the theory. Douglas has no doubt of Lizzie's guilt and presents a new (but not sensational) Ripper suspect in his long, intelligent analyses. Indeed, his comments on all the older cases are so measured and reasonable, it becomes easier to accept his contrarian view on the most recent case (and the only one on which he has actually worked first-hand), the unsolved murder of JonBenet Ramsey.

The book carries an admiring quote from Patricia Cornwell, who recently staked her reputation on painter Walter Sickert, a suspect not mentioned by Douglas and Olshaker, being Jack the Ripper. Learning Douglas's view of her theory would be interesting.

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Turning to fiction, it's always refreshing to see a writer of a detective series take a new angle on standard material, especially if the feat can be accomplished without subverting the central fascination of crime and detection that makes the genre unique.

**** Peter Robinson: *Aftermath,* Morrow, $25. We've read about plenty (too many) serial killers in recent fiction, but how about a novel that begins with the serial killer's identification and capture and spends the balance of the book exploring some questions left unanswered? As the title suggests, that's what Robinson is up to in the latest about Yorkshire cop Alan Banks. We know almost immediately that schoolteacher Terence Payne was responsible at least in part for the brutal murders of a series of blond teenage girls: their remains are found in the cellar of his house. But several issues remain. Will the policewoman who subdued Payne with several blows from her truncheon be charged with using excessive force—or even, should the suspect not survive, murder? Was Payne's abused wife another of his victims or a partner in his crimes? Why is the body of one of the missing girls not found in that grisly cellar? All the questions are answered, satisfactorily if not happily, in a serious examination of our attitudes toward and definitions of crime and criminals, plus the effects, great and small, that a series of horrible crimes have on everyone even remotely connected to them. This is virtuoso work, consolidating Robinson's position in the top flight of currently active crime writers.

*** Sheila Pim: *Creeping Venom,* Rue Morgue, $14. This 1946 novel is the third (the second new to the U.S.) of the publisher's revival of an unjustly little-known Irish writer in the cozy tradition. Again the style and characterization are charming, the background of immediate post-war Ireland illuminating, and the gardening lore instructive. One caveat: The solution is of a rare type very hard to bring off without making the reader feel let down.

** Richard Ciciarelli: *Thy Brother's Blood and Other Stories,* www.newconceptspublishing.com, $5.50. On a 3.5-inch diskette comes an *EQMM* contributor's response to my statement (and implied challenge) in February's column that few current writers attempt EQ-style puzzles. These three determinedly old-fashioned novellas about private eye Drake Robbins and blind armchair detective Carl Tolleson, complete with a challenge to the reader when all the clues are in, are definitely Queenian, if closer in spirit to the radio plays than the novels. Another clear influence is John Dickson Carr—the first two have locked rooms, the third a family curse. The title story concerns the impossible murder, promised in advance by one of the suspects and car-

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ried out despite extensive security safeguards, of a winemaker. The clues are planted so fairly, many experienced readers will solve the problems. (Any locked-room mystery I can solve has to be too easy.) Reading fiction off a computer screen requires an adjustment, but the price beats even mass market paperbacks.

While this department is not about to renounce its devotion to print media you can hold in your hand, Ciciarelli's collection is only one example of how emerging technology brings us mystery fiction and its scholarship in a variety of new formats.

On DVD, there's the interactive mystery game *Shot in the Dark* (Murder to Go, murder-to-go.com, $19.95), written and directed by David Landau, which offers interviews with suspects, physical evidence, coroner's reports, maps, and other information to be viewed in whatever order the viewer wishes. The mystery is challenging enough and the acting and characterization adequate to give the puzzle-lover some enjoyment, though it doesn't provide the satisfaction of a good mystery novel or movie. My wife and I picked the right suspect but weren't sure every bizarre action of the characters was accounted for.

On 4 CD-ROMs, there's a reference set of *The Baker Street Journal 1946–2000* (bakerstreetjournal.com, $100), not as easy to use but much more economical and space-efficient than a complete run in print form. Having over half a century of the most famous and longest-running Sherlockian periodical in such a handy format, including index, will appeal to the dedicated Irregular.

Finally, Hal Glatzer's *Too Dead to Swing,* reviewed here last November in its audio version, is now available in more conventional print form (Perseverance Press, $13.95). You don't get to hear the original '40s big-band-style songs, but you do get reproduced vintage postcards on the chapter headings and an informative foreword and afterword about how band singer and amateur sleuth Katy Green (whom we hope to see in future cases) came to be.

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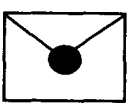

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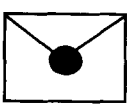

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WOMAN AT THE WINDOW

by Percy Spurlark Parker

Though he is primarily a short story writer, Percy Spurlark Parker authored the novel *Good Girls Don't Get Murdered* in 1974. Like most of his stories, especially those featuring bar owner Big Bull Benson, the book was on the hardboiled side. This time out, however, the transplanted Chicagoan, who currently lives in Las Vegas, has produced a twist-in-the-tail mystery that is almost a cozy. ¶

Attorney Gerald Houser and Dr. Valisk were standing in the hall just outside Mrs. Mupier's room when the young black man approached.

"Mr. Houser?" He looked from one to the other. "I'm Assistant D.A. Owens."

Houser extended his hand. "Yes, Mr. Owens. I appreciate your promptness."

Actually, he was ten minutes early. "The D.A. says to be here, Mr. Houser." Owens shrugged, his suit coat undisturbed by the action. "So, here I am."

Young pup, no more than a year or two out of law school, Houser thought. Owens's being black didn't pose a problem for him, but he had hoped to draw someone who'd been around a little longer. A sympathetic ear was always more available when the adversary wasn't so bright-eyed and newly filled with the letter of the law.

Houser introduced Dr. Valisk, saying, "I'll wait out here while you and the doctor conduct your interview. I think you'll get a better grasp of the situation without me being around to interject my two cents."

Owens's stare locked onto him for a moment, then he nodded. "However you want it, Mr. Houser, it's your show."

Dr. Valisk nodded to both of them, then raised his hand to knock on the door.

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❖ ❖ ❖

Adele Mupier sat in her room looking out the large window, the pink and purple flowers of her wallpaper, as always, keeping her company. It was a clear day that presented itself to her through the protection of the windowpane. Her second-floor vantage offered her a great view of the street below. She was familiar with each of the old tall frame houses, standing strong through the years, their companion oaks dominating every lawn. She loved the contrasting greens of tree, brush, and grass, the frolicking of children, the sight of lovers strolling hand in hand. It was an ever-changing landscape she surveyed from the safety of her window.

The Wilson boy, with his baggy pants and unlaced gym shoes, chased his spotted puppy across the neighboring lawns. She always expected him to trip and fall but, miraculously, it had never happened. Old man Turner sat on his porch working at getting his pipe started in a series of lightings and relightings, never seeming to get the pipe lit the first time.

Her father had smoked a pipe. She could remember the sweet burnt-tobacco smell that hung in the air long after he left for work. But that was so many years ago, long before all the bad things had happened. Before her world had shrunk to the protective walls of her bedroom.

She had been only four when her mother died and the burden of running a fledgling trucking business and raising a young daughter fell on her father. He never turned his back on either, accepting the challenge, succeeding. He had been a truly great man, stern, but wise.

"You can never trust anyone," he constantly warned her. "People will always be after your money."

He was never wrong. Her only friend in high school, Alice Nelson, once stole five dollars from her. People could not be trusted.

She had grown up a very shy person, never dating. Occasionally, in high school, she'd tagged along at school outings, but there was never a young man who even ventured to pair off with her. She heard wild tales of the antics that went on with some of her classmates, but her father's warning was always with her. Her life began more and more to revolve around taking care of him and the house.

She didn't attempt to go to college, knowing her father would prefer she stay at home. It was really what she wanted anyway, where she felt most comfortable. Safe. Years drifted by at a tranquil rate with her having little contact with the outside world. Then her father began bringing Doug home on Fridays for dinner.

She was alarmed at first to have a stranger in the house. But at her father's insistence, and because Doug and her father were so very much alike, she soon became less hesitant. They were both

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big men, although her father's figure had become somewhat rounded. But Doug had the same broad square face, the same wide smile.

Doug was her father's right-hand man at the trucking company. After about ten or twelve Friday-night dinners, her father told her it was time she got married, and that he thought Doug would be the ideal person to look after her and the business. With her father's endorsement, how could she do otherwise? They were married a month later, a week before her twenty-ninth birthday.

Outside, on the lawn across the street, the Wilson boy wrestled with his spotted puppy. She could almost hear the boy's laughter as they rolled around on the grass. The puppy bounced back and forth, a ball of brown and white fur, its little tail wagging at a furious rate.

She had never owned a pet. Maybe if she asked Doug, he would get one for her. A kitten would be nice. They were quiet and didn't require walks outside.

She and Doug had honeymooned in Mexico, staying away from the cities. She wasn't comfortable with the idea of being around a lot of people. They'd rented a camper, staying mostly to the wide expanse of countryside. It was the most glorious time she'd ever had in her entire life.

Because they'd isolated themselves from everyone, she didn't learn of her father's death until they returned.

A botched carjacking, the police had said. Her father had gone to a neighborhood restaurant for dinner and was attacked in the restaurant's parking lot. If it hadn't been for Doug, she wouldn't have survived her grief. He was wonderful. He never left her side. He did his best to console her, to convince her there was nothing they could have done. But she knew the truth. It had all been her fault. She couldn't place the blame on anyone else. If she had been home to fix her father's dinner, he wouldn't have been out that night. She had broken the chain of safety that linked her father, the house, and herself.

It wasn't quite a month later that the incident with the intruder occurred. At the time, she was nowhere close to becoming used to her father being gone. She had been going through the motions of doing her daily chores more than anything else. She'd thought she'd heard something in the kitchen, brushed it off as imagination. But then suddenly he was there, standing in the living room archway. He seemed to loom more grotesque whenever she thought of him afterward, his dark hair became more shabby, the stubble of his beard thicker. She had run screaming from the room with the intruder in pursuit. Her father had always kept a gun in the desk in his study. She was able to get to the gun, twirl and fire several shots wildly, then run for the safety of her bedroom.

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When Doug came home that evening he found her huddled on the floor next to the dresser with the gun still in her hand. There were traces of blood in the study, but the intruder, like her father's attacker, had never been caught. A policeman, at the time, had questioned her about Doug, hinting that he might have some connection with her father's death and the intruder. It was all nonsense. Doug was the only person she had left in the world whom she could trust.

That was two years ago, or had it been longer? She had trouble remembering sometimes. Anyway, with the exception of the adjoining bath, it was the last time she'd left her bedroom. She couldn't even bring herself to venture into the hallway.

Old man Turner produced a bag from his jacket pocket and began scattering breadcrumbs for the birds who fluttered about him. Once she'd counted twenty-seven of his feathered friends fluttering around as the crumbs were flung to them. One or two even caught the small morsels on the fly.

A knock on the door, disturbing her, causing her heart to pump faster.

It was as if a cloud had covered the sun. Old man Turner and his birds, the Wilson boy and his puppy seemed to fade.

She turned to the door as Dr. Valisk and a young black man came into the room. Doug understood her feelings about not leaving the bedroom. He had arranged for a housekeeper to take care of the rest of the house, prepare the meals. He had also arranged for Dr. Valisk to visit with her here, in the room, rather than trying to coax her to his office. Doug had told her talking to the doctor would make her feel better, and like her father, Doug was always right. She did indeed feel more relaxed after the doctor's visit. Doug had been with her the first few times, now Dr. Valisk came by regularly on Tuesday afternoons. But, for all the comfort he brought her, he'd never been able to convince her that there wasn't something outside the room waiting to do her harm. Nor had he ever brought anyone else with him.

Dr. Valisk smoothed his white jacket with a sweep of his right hand. He smiled his weak, thin-lipped smile. "And how are we today, Mrs. Mupier?"

"Who's he?" she asked, watching the black man.

Dr. Valisk pushed his gold-rimmed glasses back over his narrow hooknose. "This is Mr. Owens." He paused. "An—an associate of mine."

A shallow dimple formed in Owens's right cheek as he smiled. He was a handsome man, in what looked to be a tailored blue pinstripe, an appropriate pale yellow tie. He looked much like the young men she saw strolling past her window, with their arms around their young ladies. She could imagine the pleasure his

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warm smile would bring, the attention the deep set of his brown eyes would command. She could imagine the hard-muscled body that his suit concealed. She could imagine his large rough hands around her neck, halting any possible chance of her screaming.

"Why is he here?" she asked, leaning back on the window sill. "Did you get Doug's permission to bring a stranger into this house?"

"Please, Mrs. Mupier," Dr. Valisk said. "Don't be alarmed." He licked his lips, glanced at Owens, then back to her. "No, I haven't spoken to your husband. This was sort of a spur of the moment decision."

"Doug doesn't allow strangers in the house, Doctor."

"I know, Mrs. Mupier, but if you'll bear with me, I think I can explain."

She wished Doug were here. Doug would know what to do. He would protect her. But it was still midday, and Doug wouldn't be home for hours.

They sat on the two chairs she kept by the vanity. A dozen long-stemmed red roses stood tall in a heavy crystal vase on the corner of the vanity, just behind the doctor's left shoulder. The vase had belonged to her mother; a hairline crack running from top to bottom was the only blemish on the otherwise perfect surface. She couldn't remember how it got there.

"We were wondering," Dr. Valisk began, "if you might be able to help us."

"Help you? How?"

Dr. Valisk cleared his throat. "Brainstorming, you might say. Mr. Owens and I were discussing the values people place on objects. Some men have love affairs with cars. Women cherish dolls they had as children. There are lucky coins, shoes, hats . . ."

"And rooms, Doctor?" she asked.

He nodded slowly. "Well, yes, Mrs. Mupier, the relationship is basically the same. The emotional values we all place on certain objects can be very strong."

She didn't like to be challenged about her decision to stay in the room. He was being sly with it, but the challenge was still there. The doctor knew that. Why was he doing it now? It had to be Owens. He was somehow instigating the whole thing. She wished she still had her father's gun.

"I just want to stay here in my room, Doctor. I see all the outside I want, here, through my window. It's my life. I should have the right to live it as I please." She turned her attention more to Owens then. "Why should that concern anyone else?"

"Mrs. Mupier," Owens said, speaking for the first time, his dimple showing ever so faintly, "Dr. Valisk has been theorizing that it's not travel itself that makes you uncomfortable, but the thought of

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being away from your room. The concept is rather new to me, but he seems to think if you could take your room with you, you'd be completely content."

"That's impossible," she said.

"The mind can be a very powerful instrument," Owens said. "It can conjure up all sorts of things. See things that are not there. Forget things we don't want to remember."

"Ridiculous," she said, the word spitting from her mouth. A person would have to be insane to be capable of what he suggested. She turned away from them, not wanting to talk to them anymore. She just wanted to watch the people on the street below, but her view was spoiled by traces of Owens's reflection on the windowpane.

"Mrs. Mupier," Dr. Valisk said, "we truly don't mean to upset you."

"Then leave."

"Just a little longer, please." He adjusted his glasses on his nose again. "You and I have had a number of conversations. You should know by now I only want to help you. And believe me, Mr. Owens, as a newly interested party, wants to help also."

"I'm doing fine sitting here at my window. Can't you just leave me alone?"

She felt herself getting warm, felt the perspiration dampening her forehead, and she was breathing a little faster now. Maybe she should phone Doug, have him come home early. He would make them leave.

"Try to stay calm," Dr. Valisk said.

"I'm okay," she said, mopping at her face with a handkerchief. "It just gets stuffy in here at times. I'll have Doug open the window when he comes home."

"I can do that for you," Owens said, half rising.

"No!" she shouted, pushing him back onto his chair. "I said Doug would do it."

"Okay, sure," Owens said, holding up a hand. "We'll let Doug do it."

They were both looking at her intently, as though expecting her to explode. But she fooled them, she simply leaned back on the window sill and smiled.

"It must be nice to have someone like Doug," Owens said. "Someone you love, and who loves you. Someone you can trust."

"Yes, it is." She was becoming more and more leery of Owens, of the trickery of strangers. She couldn't shake the feeling that the doctor hadn't been completely truthful as to why he'd brought Owens with him today.

"Your husband took over running the trucking company after your father's death?"

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"Yes, of course. I couldn't do it. Doug knew the business."

"And he never pressured you on your decision to stay in your room, after the incident with the home invasion?"

"No, my Doug understands me," she said, feeling anger build within her. "Just how much of my life do you know about?"

"Dr. Valisk has shared a few things with me. For instance, did your husband ever tell you that he and the doctor had talked about sending you to a sanitarium?"

"Never. Doug wouldn't do that. Why is he saying these things, Doctor?"

Dr. Valisk cleared his throat. "Well, Mrs. Mupier, your husband and I have spoken on several occasions on the matter. He felt you really weren't making any progress cooped up in your room."

"Liar." She heard the word bounce from wall to wall. "Doug wouldn't do that to me. He wouldn't make me leave here."

Damn Owens. What was he trying to do to her? She felt heat and anger swirl inside of her. The room became unsteady, the bright pinks and purples of her flowered wallpaper began to run into a dull gray. In the distance there was Doug, standing by the window with his back to her. His voice was low, soothing, as he told her it would be best for her to go to the sanitarium. But that was not true. Doug would never say such a thing to her. It had never happened.

Nothing seemed to be in focus then, the whole room was one huge blur. And yet, there was the glint of the sun reflecting off the crystal vase, the dance of the roses as they floated in midair, and a single hollow scream.

"You can never trust anyone." Her father's words came back to her, wrapped themselves around her in a warm embrace. Her father was always right. But his warning couldn't apply to Doug. Her father had trusted Doug. She trusted Doug. But Doug had wanted to send her away. No. Yes. No.

She turned back to the window; everything was just too confusing. "I don't want to talk anymore."

The street was all fuzzy and dark. Was there a storm brewing? She blinked, wiped at her eyes with her handkerchief, straining to see. There was comfort as she focused on a little girl now playing with the Wilson boy and his puppy. The longer she watched them play, the more vividly the street filled in around them. A couple rode by on his-and-her matching gold bicycles. Old man Turner had gone inside but his birds remained, vying for the last of the breadcrumbs.

She didn't bother to acknowledge Dr. Valisk when he bid her good day as he and Owens departed.

Assistant District Attorney Owens followed Dr. Valisk out of the room, closing the door behind him. Mrs. Mupier's lawyer had

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asked that someone from the D.A.'s office personally observe his client. It was an unusual request, but Mrs. Mupier owned one of the largest trucking firms in town. Thus, the D.A. had sent him to go along with the charade. Now that he had, he felt in need of a stiff drink.

"Well, Mr. Owens, what do you think of my client?" Houser asked. He was a very pale and fat man, his eyes partially obscured by thick lids.

Owens took a deep breath. Mrs. Mupier had killed her husband. Neither Dr. Valisk nor Houser argued the fact of her guilt. She had struck her husband on the back of his head with a heavy crystal vase. The conclusive proof was the blood-smeared vase itself, with Mrs. Mupier's prints all over it. The housekeeper had found the body on the floor of the bedroom, with Mrs. Mupier sitting looking out the window as if everything was perfectly normal.

The crime-scene photos held a sort of abstract-art quality. There was the body, and the blood, and a dozen long-stemmed roses scattered about the floor. He'd studied the photos at length, in the hope that some answers would come to him. Nothing really had, and two important questions still remained: Why had she murdered her husband, and did she, in fact, remember doing it at all?

"We'll have to have one of our psychiatrists examine her, of course," Owens said. "But right now, I don't see our office standing in the way of an insanity plea."

"Thank you." Houser nodded, reaching out to shake his hand again.

"You've made the right decision, Mr. Owens," Dr. Valisk added. "This is the most acute case of agoraphobia I've ever dealt with. She needs medical help, not punishment. As you said, the mind is a very powerful instrument. In her present state, it's not allowing her to leave the safety of her room. You see how she reacted when you offered to open her window?"

"Yes. I guess that was the part that convinced me the most."

A nurse turned onto the hall carrying a small tray. Her spotless white uniform was either new or fresh from the cleaners. She smiled as she passed, going into one of the rooms further down the corridor. Owens turned back to Mrs. Mupier's door, slid open the narrow viewing slot.

He looked into the drab, sparsely furnished room, locking onto the lumpy bed he and Dr. Valisk had sat on during their visit, then onto the small metal-framed chair Mrs. Mupier continued to occupy as she sat and stared at the blank gray wall. ●

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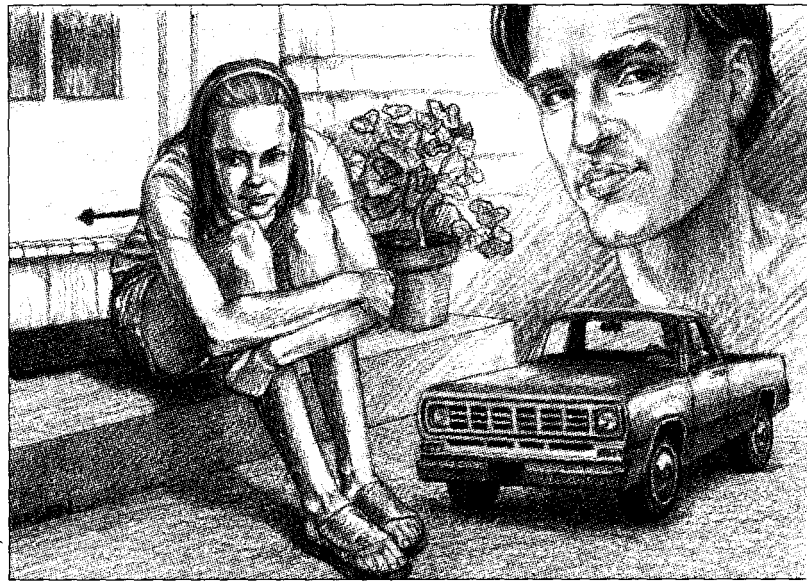

Art by Laurie Harden

False Report

by Helen Tucker

"Gerald, c'mere! Come look. She's out there again."

Gerald sighed, ran his hand across his bald head, pushed himself out of the recliner, and went to the window. Retiring from the post office hadn't made much difference in his life; Lucy kept him on his feet most of the time. If it wasn't helping with housework, it was trotting to the grocery store. When he'd mentioned this to her, only half joking, she'd said, "Use it or lose it."

"Look at her," she said when he joined her beside the window. "I don't know whether to feel pity or disgust."

Gerald knew exactly what she meant. The girl across the street, obviously in her early teens, was sitting on the front steps again, elbows on knees, chin cupped in hands, cutoff jeans so short you could see Christmas. "She ought to be on *Twats My Line,*" he muttered. Yet, like Lucy, he couldn't help but feel sorry for the girl. She was bound to be lonesome, spending the summer with her father in a strange city where she didn't know anybody her own age.

Lucy had heard the girl's parents were divorced recently and the mother had custody during the school year and the father had cus-

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tody during the summer. The father, a real-estate salesman, had moved here from Richmond several months ago and bought the little house across the street. The girl had arrived less than two weeks ago and spent a lot of time on the front steps, sometimes with a magazine in her hands, most of the time just watching the cars pass.

"Maybe I'll invite her over sometime," Lucy said.

"Hurumph!" Gerald said. "You think she wants to visit with a couple of old fogeys she's never laid eyes on? What would we talk to her about? Rock music? The latest teenage idol? I know as much about that stuff as I do about nuclear physics."

"I don't know. Maybe we could ask her over for lunch sometime. She's probably killing herself eating the mess teenagers eat now. She might enjoy a good, well-balanced meal for a change."

"Yeah, about as much as you'd appreciate greasy fries and a dried-out burger every day," Gerald said, and went back to his chair.

"I've got an appointment at the beauty parlor tomorrow," Lucy said. Her hair had been black when she was young, and now, in her sixties, thanks to a visit to Hair Apparent at least once a month, it was even blacker. "Maybe day after tomorrow we could have her over."

"Uh-huh." Gerald would cross that bridge when the Feds paid him enough retirement to ride across it in a Caddy. He reached for the remote.

EQMM seems to have a disproportionate number of writers from North Carolina. Helen Tucker, of Raleigh, shares this issue with North Carolinian Raymond Steiber, and our list of contributors boasts many others from the state, including Edgar, Anthony, and Agatha award winner Margaret Maron and Robert L. Fish Award winner Brynn Bonner. Ms. Tucker's new story is set in the south, but not, this time, in the Carolinas. †

It was the absolute crappiest summer anybody could ever dream up. Dena had known it would be bad, but in her wildest dreams she'd never thought it could be so dull. She was bored out of her gourd, absolutely dying of clotted boredom. She'd been here eleven days and it was the same old same old every day. Daddy would leave by eight-thirty every morning. At first he'd insisted that they have breakfast together, until she told him that she'd rather sleep. He'd seemed disappointed, but at least if she slept an hour or so longer it left less time with nothing to do, no one to talk to.

On the fourth day, she had called Marcie, her best friend back home, but that had only made her more homesick. Hearing Marcie talking about the sleepovers, the pool party that was planned,

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afternoons at the soda shop where dates were made, caused Dena to feel a pain that went through her whole body.

"What's it like there?" Marcie had asked.

"It's like being in hell with your back broke," Dena said, her voice as serious as one in deep mourning.

"Well, maybe it will get better," Marcie encouraged.

"Fat chance. I'm never going to meet anybody. Last weekend Daddy took me to the zoo—just like I'm a little kid—and then to a pizza place. We were supposed to go to a movie, but he got called back to the office. Somebody wanted to see a house at night. On Sunday he said let's go to church, I could probably meet some nice kids my age. I told him I wasn't a kid anymore and I didn't want to meet kids, I'd rather sleep. During the week he's gone all day. He tries to be back for dinner every night, and we either go out somewhere or he cooks, and he's not the world's greatest chef. Jeez, Marcie, there ought to be a law against divorce."

"Maybe it will get better," Marcie said again, and Dena hung up. Her friend's insincere optimism was making her ready to throw up. She hadn't called again.

In the beginning she had sat on the front steps for a purpose. She was casing the neighborhood, watching to see who came and went from the nearby houses. On either side were young couples, one with a baby. Beyond those houses were middle-aged working people, and across the street was an old couple. If her father had been going through one of his real-estate books trying to find the most uninteresting neighborhood in town to move into, he couldn't have picked a more perfect spot. The only point of interest in that whole section of town was four blocks down the street, a place with a sign hung out that said WHERE FRIENDS MEET. But it was a bar, and she was fourteen years old. So that took care of that.

The divorce had come as a surprise to her, absolute total shock, actually. She had realized a long time ago that they were not like most of her friends' families, but she had not known her parents didn't get along. There was no friction, fighting, or even nasty looks between them. They simply didn't see much of each other. Her father worked all day, showing houses and property, and often was called out at night and on weekends. Her mother worked in an advertising agency and usually worked late several nights a week. As far as Dena knew, there were no other men or women involved. In fact, that was one of the first questions she had asked her father. "Daddy, do you have a girlfriend?" And the answer had been an emphatic no. The same from her mother. Then why did they want to separate? As nearly as she could figure out, they were more in love with their jobs than with each other. When her father was offered a better base pay and commissions with a big-

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ger company in Atlanta, he didn't even have second thoughts about not taking it. And her mother didn't even have first thoughts about going to Atlanta. She was going to stay right where she was. So divorce had seemed the sensible way to go.

The custody business was something else. "Six months in each place," her father had said, but Dena had spoken up immediately and said, "I want to stay where I am. I don't want to go to a new school and have to make new friends."

It was decided that she'd spend the school year with her mother and the summer with her father. She had known even before the summer began that she would hate going to a place where she didn't know anybody and didn't even *want* to know anybody, and she had become depressed. That was one of the few times when her parents, together, told her about a decision they had made. "Dena, there's a doctor we'd like you to talk to. He can make you feel a lot better."

She knew exactly what kind of doctor they had in mind. "I don't need a shrink," she said. "I'm cooking on all four burners, I have enough sandwiches for a picnic, I'm playing with a full deck, and my elevator runs to the top floor."

They were insistent, of course, and she ended up in the office of Dr. Leo Markham. But first she had talked it over with her friend Paula, whose parents had been divorced a year ago and who also had ended up seeing a shrink.

"You've got to realize," Paula advised her, "that he'll never answer a direct question for you. He'll answer a question with a question. So don't bother asking anything. The one I went to was always asking about my dreams, so I'd make up these perfectly fabulous stories and the jerk believed me. He won't ever tell you anything, he'll try to make you figure out things for yourself. The object was to make me accept my parents' divorce, and I'd already accepted it before I ever saw him. It was a waste of time and money."

Dr. Markham turned out to be a bit different. Sitting in his austere office (there was the expected couch, but he didn't suggest that she lie down), looking about the walls at the many diplomas and commendations, Dena decided that her best defense would be to launch an offensive. "Does hanging all that stuff on the walls do something for your ego?" was her first remark to him.

Surprisingly, he laughed. "I suppose so," he said, "at least some of it." Then he leaned back in his chair, still smiling. "Dena, there's one thing you must understand at the outset. You are not responsible for your parents' divorce. It has nothing to do with you."

"Jeez! You think I don't know that? They made this mess all by themselves."

It took only one session for her to decide that Dr. Markham was a total nerd, and she went home and announced to her mother

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that she wasn't going to waste any more time that way. An argument ensued, but Dena won. Her father had left the day before for Atlanta, so there was no argument from that quarter.

When school was out, she had begged, entreated, cajoled, coaxed, and when all that failed, finally cried almost to the point of hysterics to be allowed to remain in Richmond for the summer. She would have threatened to kill herself, and might even have tried it, except that she knew if she did, her body would just be sent to her father for the summer.

So here she was. Three totally crappy months ahead of her with nothing to do, and nobody to do it with, nowhere to go. Her father was trying—she'd give him that—but he didn't have a clue. This weekend he was going to take her to the Civil War Cyclorama and Stone Mountain, just like she gave a happy hoot about either one! And he said he was going to see if any of his coworkers had kids her age, to which she'd replied, "How many times do I have to tell you I'm not a kid?" What she'd really wanted to say was, "I want to go home. This place stinks."

She had noticed that sign four blocks down the street every time they'd driven past it. Where Friends Meet. When her father told her it was a bar, she'd put it out of her mind. "It's just on the edge of residential property," he'd said, giving her the benefit of his realty knowledge, "so that section didn't have to be rezoned."

Now, as she thought about the sign, she remembered that the hours on the window said "Open Noon to 2 A.M." It was three P.M. right now so it was open . . . and she wanted to go. How old did you have to be to get into a bar? Eighteen, she thought. If she had a false ID card, she could swing it, but she didn't, so the best she could do was fix herself up to look at least eighteen.

She left the front steps and went to her bedroom, a place that held none of her pictures, posters, or anything else that would make the room hers. If you're going to serve a sentence in prison, why try to make the prison look like home?

She went through her clothes, decided they all looked like baby junk—except maybe the long gray skirt. It hit her just above the ankles. Her red blouse with the gray piping would go okay with the skirt. But her highest heels were only a little more than an inch; they'd have to do.

Next came the makeover of herself. She wound her shoulder-length brown hair into a knot and pinned it on top of her head like a tiny tiara. That added a little more height and possibly a couple of years. The big problem was her face; she had a sort of babyish look.

The only makeup she had was lipstick and some eyeshadow that she and Marcie had bought for themselves and used when they knew their parents wouldn't see them. She used both abundantly now, then gave herself a searching look in the mirror. Eighteen?

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Why not?

She left the house and walked the four blocks to Where Friends Meet. *Who knows,* she thought, *maybe I'll meet a friend there.* And even if she didn't, it was a way to kill time.

She pulled at the big oak door, went inside, and blinked, thinking something had happened to her eyes. It was as dark as a bat cave. The only light was an eerie yellowish globe above the bar on the other side of the room. It seemed to be reflecting off the bald head of the fat bartender, who was talking to the one customer seated at the end of the long bar while the customer ran his right index finger round and round the top of a beer mug. They were the only two people in the room.

Meet friends here? Fat chance.

There were a dozen or so tables with four chairs around each, dark, heavy wood. So. She was here, she might as well stay for a few minutes. She sat down at a table and was aware that the two men were both staring at her as though she had unexpectedly dropped through the ceiling. Should she say something? She'd never been in a bar before.

"This isn't for men only, is it?" she asked.

"No, indeedy," the bartender said. "What'll you have?"

Geez, she hadn't thought of that. In a bar you were supposed to order something alcoholic, but if she got caught drinking . . .

"It's so hot outside, I think I'll just have something long and cool," she said, thinking of lemonade.

"He makes the world's best daiquiris," the man at the bar offered. "Try a banana one."

"Okay," she said. A drink made with banana should be as harmless as one made with lemon.

The man seemed to take her acceptance of his suggestion as an invitation to join her, so he ambled slowly over to her table with his mug. Close up, she could see him better. He had curly blond hair, bluish-gray eyes, and was as tanned as though he spent every day flaked out on a beach. The only thing that kept him from being movie-star handsome was the expression on his face. It was sort of hard-looking, even when he smiled, as though behind that smile he was really thinking something unpleasant.

"Mind if I join you? Eddie's getting tired of entertaining me." He sat down across from her without waiting for her answer. "Haven't seen you in here before."

"I haven't been here before," she said, feeling suddenly shy. Let him direct the conversation; that way, she wouldn't make a mistake.

"I'm Kirby." He extended his hand across the table.

"I'm Dena." She shook his hand, which was cold from being around the cold mug.

"What do you do, Dena?"

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"I—I'm on vacation right now, just visiting."

"What do you do when you're not on vacation?"

"I work—at a school."

"A teacher?"

"Uh—sort of an assistant." She had to get him off this subject instantly. "What do *you* do?"

"I'm a doctor."

He said it in a tone of voice exactly like those guys in the Zantac commercial and she almost laughed . . . except that he didn't look or act like any doctor she'd ever seen. "Oh?" It had the ring of a question.

"Yeah, a doctor of philosophy."

"Oh?" Even more doubtful.

"Yeah, I doctor other people's philosophies." He laughed and looked toward the bartender, who was placing the daiquiri in front of Dena. "Don't I, Eddie?"

"Sure you do. 'Specially after you've had a few."

She laughed because she thought she was supposed to.

The bartender went back to the bar and leaned over it, propped on his elbows, and made no pretense of hiding the fact that he was interested in the conversation at the table.

"How's your daiquiri?" Kirby asked when she took a cautious sip.

"Delicious." It really was, and she threw caution to the wind and drank. "It was a good choice."

"Since I chose it, it's on me," he said, "and you can't stop with one. Nobody ever drank just one daiquiri at Eddie's."

She finished it quickly, ready for another. Kirby signaled for Eddie.

"Which school you work at?" he asked when the second daiquiri was in front of her.

"Not one here," she said quickly. "I'm from Richmond."

"I've never been to Richmond," he said, as though it were the only place in the USA he'd never been. "What's it like?"

"It's, like, cool. Really cool."

His eyes narrowed as though he was working out a complicated problem. Then he said, "How old are you?"

She blinked. What brought *that* on? "I'm eighteen."

"Jesus!" His voice was too low for Eddie to hear. "You shouldn't be in here."

"Why not?"

"You have to be twenty-one."

"Oh! I didn't know that."

"Finish your drink and let's get out of here before we're all arrested. Listen, I know a place . . . Are you staying far from here?"

"Four blocks down the street." Should she go with him, a stranger? He wasn't a stranger to the bartender; he was a regular, apparently. So with Eddie knowing she left with him, he wouldn't

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dare try anything. Anyway, he'd been nothing but nice, friendly.

"My wheels are in a garage not too far from here. Should be fixed by now, so why don't you go back to . . . what's the street number?"

"Eight-oh-six-one."

". . . and I'll pick you up in about twenty minutes."

"And go where?"

"A really nice lounge where even children are welcome."

If they let children in, it must be an okay place. "I'll be sitting on the front steps," she said.

She left as he was paying for the drinks, and went back to her father's house. It was almost a half-hour before a red pickup stopped at the curb. He didn't get out, but opened the door on the passenger side, leaned over, and, taking her hand, pulled her in.

Gerald, on his knees as he pulled weeds beside the hedge which separated his yard from that next door, couldn't believe the change that had occurred across the street. The girl was sitting on the front steps again, but instead of the abbreviated jeans, she had on a skirt that not only covered her knees but her entire legs.

There was certainly no accounting for what young people did these days. He was glad he had no grandchildren to cope with or try to figure out. He'd be loon-crazy in a week's time.

This yard alone had about driven him daft. That nandina bush he'd planted seemed to have sent seeds over half the yard and now little nandinas were choking out prized azaleas. And on the other side of the walk, violets and dandelions were battling each other to see which could take over the yard first. Lucy didn't seem to mind them; she thought they were colorful, pretty, even if they were wild.

And speaking of wild . . . He glanced across the street again just as a red pickup stopped in front of the house. The girl stared at it as if trying to see who it was or trying to hear something the driver was saying, then she stood up and went to the curb.

The door on the passenger side was opened, the driver leaned over, and the girl was helped—or pulled—into the vehicle.

"My word!" Gerald said out loud. "What's going on here?" He stayed on his knees a minute or two longer as the pickup drove away. He looked at the license, thinking it might be a stranger asking directions, but no, it was a Fulton County license. He put down his spade and went in the house. Lucy was in the kitchen wrapping aluminum foil around two potatoes.

"Something strange going on across the street," he said.

"Strange things probably have been going on over there ever since the girl came," was Lucy's observation. "What now?"

"A red pickup just stopped there and the girl either got in or was pulled in. She went off with the driver."

"So what are you saying? That she was forced into the truck?"

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He shrugged, remembering how she was dressed. "No, I guess not. She'd changed her clothes, sort of dressed up. I guess she went of her own accord." He went back outside to finish the weeding.

"A pickup in a pickup," Lucy murmured, sticking the potatoes in the oven.

They had just sat down to dinner when they heard the calling, at first just the name Dena, the tone raised on the second syllable as though questioning, and then more frantic, "Dena! Dena!"

Gerald got up and went to the front door with Lucy only a few steps behind. The man across the street was wandering around his tiny yard as though he expected the girl to materialize out of the bushes.

Gerald looked at Lucy. "Should we tell him she's gone off with some man or just stay out of it? I don't want to get involved in somebody else's mess."

"*If it were my* daughter, I'd want to know," Lucy said, a hard look coming into her usually cheerful face. "That girl must really be some piece of work."

Gerald went out into the yard, again with Lucy only a step behind. "Sir, are you calling your daughter?"

The man looked over, surprised, and quickly crossed the street. Up close, he was quite handsome. Dark hair with a touch of gray at the temples, dark eyes, a mouth that had little lines, like laugh lines, around it, tall, good physique. But now his eyes, his expression, even his stance, implied pure, raw worry. "Have you seen her?" he asked. "She's usually here waiting for me when I get home every night. Oh, excuse me, my name is Finley Galton. I moved in several months ago."

"Gerald Mulder." He held out his hand. "And my wife, Lucy. Yes, I saw your daughter about an hour and a half ago. A red pickup stopped in front of your house and your daughter was sitting on the steps. She got in the pickup and drove away with the man."

Finley Galton stared at Gerald as though he had just been told his daughter had flown to heaven in a chariot of fire. "Are you sure we're talking about the same girl? My daughter has light brown hair, shoulder length, and . . ."

"Yes, I'm sure," Gerald interrupted.

"But Dena doesn't know anybody here. She wouldn't just . . ."

"Maybe the man stopped to ask directions and she went with him to show him where . . ."

"Dena's new here. She couldn't give directions to anywhere."

There was a minute of silence while the same ominous thought went through three minds. Gerald expressed it first. "You think maybe she was kidnapped?"

Galton's face was now completely contorted with worry. "I don't

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know. Right in broad daylight? Did you get a good look at the driver?"

"No, only the truck. Red pickup." Then he remembered. "Fulton County license. First three numbers seven-oh-four. I don't know the rest. He drove off too fast."

"I'm going to the police," Galton said. "Will you go with me as a witness to what happened?"

Gerald nodded. "Sure, I'll help if I can. There's a substation less than a mile from here. We can go there."

Finley Galton's frown was as dark as a thunderhead. Seated in a chair in front of the desk of Police Lieutenant James Payson, a youngish man with a high forehead and a square jaw which gave him a determined look, for the past hour, he wanted to beat his fists on the arms of the chair and scream, "For God's sake, do something!" It took every ounce of self-control to try to remain calm, at least on the exterior. His insides were churning like the bottom of a volcano crater. Until Gerald Mulder had made his statement about Dena probably being pulled into the pickup, it was obvious the police, the lieutenant and two detectives, thought the girl had simply run away.

"We get a lot of these reports about runaway kids," Payson had said, "especially in the summer. Kids get restless and . . ."

"Listen, will you?" Finley had almost yelled. "Listen to what my neighbor saw."

Gerald told what he had seen and then went home. There was nothing else he could say since he hadn't had a good look at the driver of the truck.

Payson had checked with the DMV and described the truck and given the available info on the license. It took only a few seconds for DMV to come up with a name: Kirby Lansing. And an address in one of the suburbs, which was checked. An apartment building, nobody home at that number.

Now that they had the full license number, Finley was waiting while cops scoured the area trying to find the truck. He had been advised to go home and "we'll let you know the minute we have something," but he wasn't about to leave. He didn't want to wait a minute, he wanted to know the *instant* there was something to know.

Should he call Dena's mother? No, better to wait until there was something definite to report. Neither she nor Dena had wanted him to have summer custody, and this would only reinforce their opinion that they had been right.

"Mr. Galton, should this turn out to be a kidnapping for ransom, it might be better for you to wait at home in case there's a call," Payson said, and it was obvious from his tone that he didn't really think that was what it was. "We'll send somebody with you."

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It was also obvious he wasn't wanted here. "I think I'll wait a little longer."

The phone rang and Payson grabbed it. "Yes?" Then he was quiet, listening and looking at Finley. Finally, he said, "Okay, we'll get a couple of cars over there. Wait for them."

"What?" Finley asked the second the phone was hung up.

"They've spotted the truck at a motel just off the interstate." Payson stood up. "If you want to wait here . . ."

"I'm going with you," Finley said. "If I can't go with you, I'll follow in my car."

The motel was not one of the big chains. River View, with no river in sight, appeared to be a mom-and-pop operation. It was a long wooden building, painted a pale green that looked almost luminous. There was an office in the center, with a large lounge to the right of it, and on one side were five identical doors, with four doors on the other side.

"My God, if he's . . ." Finley began as Payson parked the unmarked police car under a giant oak tree. "I'll kill him."

"Easy there," Payson said. "You stay here until we see what's what. This Lansing fellow may not even be the one we want."

But Finley wasn't about to remain in the car when his daughter might be inside going through God knew what. He went in the office door right behind Payson.

Three marked police cars parked under the oak and the cops waited outside their vehicles for the lieutenant to signal to them.

Payson identified himself immediately to the squat little man behind the desk who peered around the lieutenant warily at the cops outside.

"You got a Kirby Lansing registered here?"

"Nope. Only got two registrations so far. No Lansing. Folks don't usually come here until all the big motels fill up. Then we get 'em." The man's face had turned fiery red and he looked as though he might start hyperventilating. "What's this Lansing done?"

"What names you got on the register?"

"Hackney and Billings," the man said without looking at the registration book.

"Either of them got a young girl with them?"

"No. But there's a couple in the lounge. Been there over an hour, but they ain't registered."

Finley and Payson got to the lounge door at the same time. It was a large room with a few tables on one side, an old-timey jukebox on another side, and a small, square, cleared space in the middle of the room which was used as a dance floor. The juke was playing Tommy Dorsey's "I'm Getting Sentimental Over You," and a couple was slow-dancing.

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"Dena!" Finley yelled. "Dena!"

Kirby was right: The lounge really was cool. "This is neat," she said after they'd been there awhile, "but where is everybody?" They were the only ones in the large room.

"There'll be a crowd here tonight," Kirby said. "People come because they like to dance to the music. Mostly older people, but some young ones, too."

The music had boggled her mind when she first read the list of records on the old jukebox. In fact, the records themselves were something else.

"They're seventy-eights," Kirby explained. "That's what came before forty-fives, thirty-threes, and then tapes. These are old and sort of scratchy, but still good. I like the songs. They've got a tune and the words say something."

She looked at the song titles. "You Belong to Me" by Jo Stafford; "Body and Soul" by Billy Eckstine; "Don't Let the Stars Get in Your Eyes," Perry Como; "Our Very Own," Sarah Vaughan . . . and a dozen or so more, also by artists she'd never heard of. And she'd never slow-danced before, although she had seen it done in old movies on TV. At first she had trouble following Kirby, but then she relaxed and it was nice.

"What do you really do?" she asked as they were dancing to a medley from some old musical.

"I drive a truck for Consolidated Lumber," he said. "I haul trees from the woods to the plant, then haul lumber to the warehouse."

"Oh. That must be interesting." She couldn't think of anything else to say.

"Not very," he laughed. And then he held her closer as Perry Como sang "Prisoner of Love."

"We could get a room here," he said.

She pulled away. "Oh no! I have to be back no later than six-thirty or my . . . the people I'm visiting will worry."

"You could call and tell them you ran into an old friend and will be a little late."

"No, no, I can't do that. I have to go back." She began to panic. "Maybe we ought to go back right now."

"Look, if you didn't want to have some fun, what the hell were you doing in the bar in the middle of the afternoon? You were saying 'come on' clearer than a TV commercial."

"I was *not!*" She was afraid she was going to cry. "You take me back right now!"

"Okay, okay, don't get your knickers in a twist. I'll get you back in time. But at least finish this dance." He put his arms around her again and started singing along with Perry. *I need no shackles to remind me, I'm just a prisoner of love.*

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She glanced over at the door to the office when another record came up on the juke and . . . Oh my God!—there was her father and another man.

"Dena! Dena!" her father yelled as he ran across the room to her. He would kill her. And if he didn't kill her he would keep her locked up in the crappy little room all day and all night for the rest of the summer. She was sure of it. What could she *do?*

She broke away from Kirby screaming, "Daddy! I knew you'd find me."

The man with her father was looking from her to Kirby. "What's going on here?" he asked.

"He made me come with him." She pointed to Kirby. "I didn't want to and he brought me anyway."

Her father put his arm around her as the other man said, "Are you saying he kidnapped you?"

"Yes, he did. He forced me into his truck and brought me here and made me dance with him."

Kirby, mouth agape, looked from one to the other. "That's not true. She's lying."

"Daddy, please take me home," Dena cried before Kirby could say anything else. "I want to go home."

"She's lying," Kirby said again. "I picked her up at a bar and . . ."

"He's the one lying," Finley Galton said. "She wouldn't go to a bar. She's only fourteen."

"Fourteen! Jesus!" Kirby gasped. "She told me she was eighteen. That's why I got her out of the bar and brought her here."

The man with her father suddenly jerked Kirby's arms behind him, handcuffed him, and said, "Kirby Lansing, you are under arrest for kidnapping. You have the right to remain silent . . ."

Dena, now terrified at the consequences of what she had said, was about to protest the arrest by saying Kirby hadn't really hurt her, but her father took her arm and hurried her outside before she could say anything.

There were three police cars and another car in the parking area, and several cops were standing by the cars. As they passed the first car, her father said to the cop, "The lieutenant's arrested the kidnapper."

The lieutenant appeared then, pushing the protesting Kirby ahead of him to one of the cars. Kirby was shoved into the backseat and the car took off. Then the lieutenant went to the unmarked car and she and her father got in the backseat.

"Did he . . . did he do anything . . . to hurt you?" her father asked as they began the ride back to the city.

She knew what he was asking. "No, but he wanted to get a room there."

"He didn't . . ."

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"No, he didn't do anything. He just wanted to dance."

Her father let out a long sigh.

"You want to go to a hospital to get her checked?" the lieutenant asked.

"No need," her father said. "She's okay, just scared."

So. She had saved herself if not Kirby. Now she didn't have to worry about any punishment. "What will they do to Kirby?" she asked.

The lieutenant looked back over his shoulder. "He'll be fingerprinted, mug shots taken, locked up, and later tried."

"And then put away for a long, long time, I hope," her father said.

"Are you sure this was all against your will?" the lieutenant asked. "The guy doesn't have a sheet, no priors."

"He said I was his prisoner of love and he wanted to shackle me," she said.

"We got there just in time," her father said, putting his arm across her shoulder.

It took her next to forever to go to sleep that night. She kept hearing the lieutenant telling what would happen to Kirby. Fingerprinted, photographed, jailed, tried. A trial? She would have to testify. She'd seen enough trials on TV to know what would happen to her. She'd have to swear to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. If she told the truth now, they'd probably put her in jail for lying, and if she lied on the stand, ditto.

There was no way out of this mess she had made.

She was up early the next morning, even before her father. She decided to soften him up by making his breakfast, and if he was in a pretty good mood . . . Well, she'd decide then whether she could tell him something close to the truth without revealing everything.

She went outside to pick up the paper to have it beside his plate, and the first thing that caught her eye on the front page of *The Constitution* was a headline: KIDNAPPED GIRL FOUND BY POLICE.

She stopped in the middle of the walk and read the story, much relieved to find her name was not mentioned. She was referred to as "the young girl" throughout, except when Kirby, whose name and address were given, was quoted saying he didn't know she was a minor. He, of course, declared his innocence to the charge of kidnapping, but the story in the paper was as she had told it to the lieutenant. Even so, she did not want her father to see the paper, so she hid it in the bushes beside the front steps. If he found it later, he'd think it had been thrown there by the paper carrier.

When her father came to breakfast he looked as though he hadn't slept much, either.

"Get out of those shorts and put on a dress," were his first words.

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"Why?"

"We have to go down to the station. The lieutenant wants to get your statement."

"He got it yesterday."

"This is official, for the record. He was nice enough not to demand that you do it yesterday."

"But I don't want . . ."

"Dena, this is something you have to do. I'll be with you. I'm not going to work today."

That was small comfort. Actually, no comfort at all.

She thought she would go to the lieutenant's office, repeat what she had said yesterday, and go home, but it didn't turn out that way. At the substation they were shown into a room with a long table, chairs around it, and not another stick of furniture anywhere. Not even a picture on the bleak brown walls. Lieutenant Payson was waiting for them. "Dena, I hope you're over your scare now. You feeling all right today?"

"Sure."

"I've got this little recorder here, and a secretary will take your report as well."

"Okay." She didn't think she could go through that rigamarole again, or even remember all she had said yesterday when she had been in a state of panic.

An older woman with gray hair, wearing a neat suit almost the same color, came in, smiled pleasantly, and sat down at the table. She placed a stenographer's notebook in front of her.

"Well, let's get started," the lieutenant said. "First, Dena, you should know that Lansing has said he picked you up at a bar called Where Friends Meet and took you out of there when he found out you were too young to be in a bar. He admits that he mentioned getting a room at the motel, but dropped the idea when you weren't agreeable. Said he was going to take you home after one more dance."

He was looking at her as though he were a living lie detector, waiting to trap her. What could she say except a questioning "Oh?"

"By the way, we've sent someone to the bar to talk to the bartender. Lansing says this Eddie will back up his story."

Oh my God, she was toast! Dead! Done for! She stared down at her hands in her lap and wanted to crawl under the table.

"Dena?" The lieutenant was waiting for her to say something, to deny Kirby's accusations.

"Speak up, Dena," her father said. "There's no need to be afraid. That man can't hurt you now. He'll be in prison for a long time."

Still she couldn't think of anything to say.

The lieutenant was staring at her now, his eyes like lasers burn-

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ing through her. "Is what he said true, Dena? Is that what really happened?"

"Yes," she said without looking up, her voice a whisper.

"You did go to the bar and went with Lansing voluntarily to the motel?" The lieutenant wasn't going to let up; he would keep on until her whole life was ruined.

"Yes."

"Why didn't you tell us that yesterday?"

"I—I was afraid to." She looked at her father. His face was beet-red but he didn't say anything.

"Why did you go to the bar, Dena?"

"I was tired of reading and tired of TV, and I don't know anybody here and the sign said Where Friends Meet and I . . . I wanted to make some friends."

Her father spoke then. "What will you do now, Lieutenant?"

"I can't say at this time, but there's a possibility she could be charged with filing a false police report."

"And the man?"

"The kidnapping charge will be dropped, of course. But he may be charged with contributing to the delinquency of a minor."

"He didn't do anything," Dena mumbled.

"He did suggest getting a motel room, and he must have known by looking at you that you aren't eighteen."

"May I take her home now?" Her father half rose from his chair.

"Yes, and try to keep her there," the lieutenant said.

It was the week from hell. Her father was too angry even to fuss, lecture, or speak to her except to say that she was not to leave the property for a week, and after that only when accompanied by him; she was to have no TV for a week, nor use the phone unless the house caught fire, or the computer. "And if the house catches fire, I'll have you arrested for arson," he said.

"What am I supposed to do all day?"

"Concentrate on what you *have* done and learn to stop lying."

"Why don't you send me home?" Her best idea yet.

"You are home. This is your home for the summer."

After that, he had nothing to say to her. Their evening meal, the only one they had together, passed in silence, after which her father read the newspaper or messed with the computer. Her most interesting activity now was sitting on the front steps and watching an occasional car go by.

It was in the afternoon of the third day of Punishment Week, when she was sitting on the steps, that the red pickup stopped in front of the house and Kirby leaned over to the passenger side and motioned to her.

She stared, not quite believing that he had the nerve to come here.

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"I want to talk to you," he called. "I've got something to tell you."

Well, maybe she owed him a conversation. She got up slowly and walked to the curb.

He opened the passenger door. "Get in."

"I can't. I'm not supposed to leave the yard."

He leaned over further, grasped her arm, and pulled. "Get in."

"Stop! You're hurting me." She had to get in or have her arm pulled out of the socket.

He shut the door, started the truck, and took off.

"Hey!" she yelled. "I told you I'm not supposed to leave the yard."

"You do a lot of things you're not supposed to," he said, "including ruining my life."

"I told the cops you didn't kidnap me, and it even came out in the newspaper that I wasn't telling the truth when I said you did."

"Yes, but your name was never mentioned. Mine was. I've lost my job because of you, I've been given notice at my apartment building, and my girlfriend has ditched me."

"But the police dropped the charges. The lieutenant said they would."

"Like hell they did. Now I'm charged with contributing to the delinquency of a minor. I've got to pay a fine and do two hundred hours of community service."

"I'm sorry."

"You're gonna be a lot sorrier."

Now he was scaring her. "Where are you taking me?"

He laughed a raucous laugh, not like the Kirby of the other day. "I'm kidnapping you."

"You take me back right now or I'll tell the police you really did kidnap me."

He kept on laughing. "You do that, kiddo. You just do that."

The weather had cooled a bit, the temperature now pleasant enough for Lucy and Gerald to enjoy sitting on the front porch. The girl across the street, their main topic of conversation after the two stories in *The Constitution* about her, was sitting on the steps again.

"Seems that's all she does anymore," Lucy said.

"I'm surprised her father doesn't lock her in a closet or somewhere until he gets back from work," Gerald commented.

"Oh, look, look!" Lucy stood up to see better.

The red pickup had stopped across the street and the girl was going to it. In a few seconds she was in the truck and it peeled out like a racer.

"Would you look at that!" Lucy couldn't quite trust her own eyes. "I suppose if she gets caught, she'll claim he kidnapped her."

Gerald laughed. "Who'd believe her?"

Lucy sat down again. "She's some piece of work, that girl." ●

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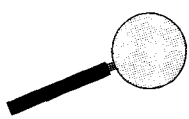

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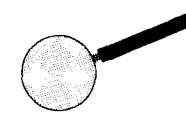

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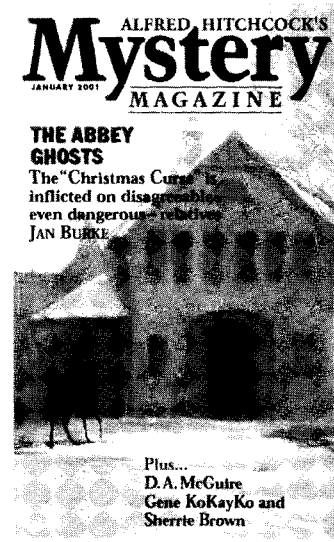

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